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Old Dan Rackback, The Great Extarminator;

OR,
THE TRIANGLE'S LAST TRAIL.

BY OLL COOMES.

CHAPTER I.

THE MYSTERIOUS OLD MAN'S SHOT.

Down across the plains of Dakota from its source among the Black Hills, wound Beaver Creek, a tributary to the Big Cheyenne river. Like a mere thread of silver it flashed and spark-

led in the sunlight as it crept softly on toward the parent stream across the bosom of the great brown ocean of prairie. Now and then its continuity was broken by clumps of cottonwood and pine trees, that were interspersed over the plain and along the valleys like oases in the desert, but darting through these, it went murmuring silently onward, with the secret of its golden fount buried in its bosom.

To this stream, and at a point upon its shores known as Lone Tree Grove, we call the attention of our readers.

It was a warm, balmy, dreamy October day. Soft and mellow shone the sun's rays through the blue ethereal depths of "Indian Summer." The plain was brown and sear. Autumnal frosts had sapped the life from that great

ocean of verdure and robbed it of its emerald hue. The tall, graceful cottonwoods bristled in their nakedness, and their fallen robes rustled ominously at their feet. Only the pines retained a vestige of the summer gone, for they still were green.

The day had been unusually still. Scarcely a breath of air was stirring; not a bird chirped in the little grove of cottonwoods—not even an insect's droning wing broke the foreboding spell of the hour and place. Solitude and silence reigned supreme; but however sacred they may have been, they were soon to be broken in upon by profane and unholy sounds.

The far-off report of a rifle swelled suddenly and sullenly across the plain, and the eye turning in the direction whence



DAKOTA DAN UTTERED A YELL OF TRIUMPH, THEN AWAY HE WENT, RELOADING HIS RIFLE AS HE GALLOPED ALONG.

It came, would have seen a tiny cloud appear against the misty blue of the northern horizon. It would have discovered that it was a dust cloud rising from the earth, and at the same time the ear would have heard the sound of human voices rising from out its envolving depths. For a while the cloud appeared to hang stationary upon the air, gradually swelling in volume; but a keen eye would soon have discovered that this was due to the fact that the cloud was coming nearer and nearer on a straight line toward the grove—drifting slowly down the wind like a black sail. As it came still closer, it seemed to move faster, leaving a dark, diminishing line hanging in the air along its trail; while clearer and more distinct came those excited cries from out its depths.

One unaccustomed to the prairies might have taken it for a whirlwind sweeping down from the north, freighted with the shrieks of storm-spirits; but one more experienced in the freaks of the wind and weather upon the plain, would have known better. In fact, no one would have been left long in doubt, for, out of the cloud, like spirits out of the gloaming, the proportions of fast-moving horsemen gradually unfolded themselves.

There were half a dozen or more of them in one body, while a few hundred yards in advance was one man, alone.

To a casual observer, the cause of the rapid riding would have soon become manifest; the one in advance was an Indian warrior, and in his arms he held the form of a young white girl, whose rescue was no doubt the object of the white men in pursuit. The captive was, to all appearance, lifeless. Her head hung backward over the encircling arm of her captor; her white face was upturned toward the blue sky, and a wealth of golden hair floated on the wind about her head and over the brawny, naked shoulders of the savage. If she was not dead, she had been relieved of all the horrors and agony of captivity by terror throwing the veil of unconsciousness over her mind.

The Indian was a Sioux, and notwithstanding the supposed friendliness of that tribe, he was in war-paint and looked like a fiend incarnate as he came thundering down the plain. He bestrode a spirited horse whose sides were reeking with foam. He rode bareback and sat the animal as though immovably fixed upon it. His dark eyes glowed with a look of fiendish admiration as he glanced at the sweet, fair face of his helpless captive; then, as the shouts of his pursuers rung forth upon the air, a look of wild fear and determination contracted the muscles of his face, and he urged on his panting beast.

Of the six pursuers, all were white men, and no doubt the friends of the captive maid. The eldest of the party was a man past forty. He led in the pursuit with the rein in one hand and a rifle in the other. His head was bare, and his long, iron-gray hair floating back from the brow, distinctly revealed the profile of an intellectual face. He wore a blue woolen shirt and gray pants. Like his head, his feet were bare. He had evidently stripped himself for the race, as also had his companions. The horse he bestrode was an exact match for the one the savage was upon, and no doubt its mate.

The rest of the party were all young men, in whose faces shone the spirit of adventure. They were well armed, and each held a revolver in his hand, ready for instant use.

The pursuers were fully sixty rods behind the savage, yet appeared to be gaining steadily on him. They were using every exertion to increase the speed of their animals, whose flanks were white with foam.

"Spur on, boys! spur on!" shouted Major Loomis, the leader of the pursuers; "we may head the red devil off on the banks of the Beaver, if he don't give us the slip by dodging into the grove. Spur on, boys! My poor child—my Amy must be saved!"

A shout of encouragement answered the father's urgent appeal and the men pressed their animals to their utmost speed.

On, straight toward the creek—leaving the grove a few rods to the left—the savage made his headlong way.

On the very edge of the precipitous bank he drew rein, ran his eyes up and down the stream, then glanced backward at his pursuers, then across the plain on the opposite side of the creek, when a cry of triumph rung from his lips. He was encouraged—incited to this by sight of a band of horsemen sweeping down from the distant hills toward him. Full well he knew they were friends, although they were over a mile and a half away.

Dropping himself to the ground, he turned his animal loose, and clasping the maiden still tighter in his sinewy arms, he sprang down the bank, plunged into the water to his waist and floundered across to the opposite shore, gaining the bank and the cover of a large cottonwood tree just as the pursuers came up on the other side.

"Dismount, boys and follow on foot!" cried the half-distracted father, leaping from his animal's back. He saw that the high banks made it totally impossible to cross the stream on horseback.

In a moment every man was dismounted, and giving the horses into the care of two of their number, the others were about to leap down the bank when a man cried out:

"Stay, men! for God's sake, look yonder!" and he pointed across the stream toward the band of approaching horsemen whom all could see were Indians.

"Oh, my child! my poor child!" cried the major, clutching his brow and staggering backward, as if under the force of a terrific blow.

The savage still kept behind the tree on the opposite shore, fully a hundred yards away. The tree was forked and noted for its immense size. All over the territory it was known as

the Lone Tree, and the grove near it, as Lone Tree Grove. It was a wide, branching cottonwood, under whose cool, Arcadian shadows had doubtless rested, from the excitement and fatigue of the chase, the braves of a dozen generations.

The tree forked within three feet of the ground, the prongs being about eighteen inches apart immediately above the crotch; and as the little band of pursuers stood gazing across the stream in speechless silence—knowing not what course to pursue—they saw the white face of Amy Loomis look toward them through the forks of the tree. She had recovered from her swoon.

Simultaneous with the discovery of her face, they heard the savage utter a yell of mocking triumph, then they saw his painted face lifted just above and back of the maiden's head.

In an instant Major Loomis threw his trusty rifle to his shoulder and drew a bead upon the savage, but before he could fire the cowardly villain covered his head behind that of the maiden, just daring to peer over her shoulder with one eye.

"Shoot! why don't the pale-face shoot?" yelled the bold, taunting devil, in tolerable English.

Major Loomis lowered his rifle.

"I dare not," he said, his face as white as a sheet and his hand trembling; "I can not slay my darling though she were better dead than a captive in that barbarian's power. Hardy, you are a capital shot: try the demon—you can see a portion of his head just above Amy's left shoulder."

"Why not charge upon him, major?" asked one of the party; "we can get back here before that horde comes within range of us."

"It would be sure death to us, Frank. That fiend is trying to decoy—tempt us over there; and that he would not undertake were he not certain of our destruction. I dare say there are a hundred ambuscaded savages lying in the hollow, just back of the tree. Here, Hardy, try your hand. If you slay her, no blame shall rest upon you. If you kill the savage, maybe she can get behind the bank before the others reach her; then we can cover her retreat."

Hardy took his rifle and examined the priming. He was a youth of twenty, with a keen eye and steady nerve. Finally he faced the Lone Tree and raised the weapon. All could see that he trembled.

"Hold, thar, will ye, jist a holy second."

It was a strange voice that spoke and Hardy lowered his rifle.

The party stood within a rod of the outskirts of Lone Tree Grove, from whence the voice had come, and as all turned toward it they saw a little clump of bushes slightly parted and the face of an old man—the most quaint, odd and comical looking face imaginable—peering through upon them. Our friends were completely astonished at sight of it, and the first impulse was to laugh, but the significant shake of a long, bony finger enjoined silence upon all as effectually as though they had been stricken speechless.

"Step this way, will ye, major?" again said the old man, crooking his finger, and motioning Loomis toward him, with rapid movements of the hand.

Loomis cautiously approached him, at the same time demanding:

"Who are you, and what do you want?"

"I'm an ole subject of anatomy, what takes to shootin' In-gins jist as nateral as water runs down hill; and, stranger, seein' that gal, be she your darter or not, is in an excrooshin' deefickilty, s'pose you allow me to administer to that red-skin. I can see the blaze of the devil's eye jist above her shoulder, and I think I can spile that optic if any man this side of creation can."

Major Loomis glanced at the slender form of the old man, in whose movements there seemed the falter of age, and in whose hand there was a preceptible tremor. His eyes, also, seemed dimmed by the use of time, and altogether there was nothing in the looks of the aged specimen of humanity to warrant the escape of the captive alive, should her father allow him a shot at the red-skin. His rifle was also one of the oldest pattern, the stock extending full length of the long barrel. Just in front of the guards the stock was worn nearly in two by long usage.

"I want to rescue my child, not slay her," said Loomis, in a rather negative tone.

"Then I'll try the red-skin a whet, stranger. The crack of my rifle will announce his arrival at the gates of purgatory," and the old borderman raised his rifle, and leveled it at the little patch of the red-skin's face just visible above the captive's shoulder.

For fully half a minute he held the weapon at an aim. Loomis held his breath, for he saw that the rifle trembled. He was afraid to speak, for fear of disturbing the man at the wrong instant. To his surprise, however, the old man lowered the piece without firing. He shut his eyes tightly and kept them closed for several seconds. Meanwhile, he worked his fingers first upon one hand then the other, as if to relieve them of a cramp.

"I'm a leetle shaky, stranger, to what I used to was," he said. "My eyes don't reach out, either, as well as they did once; but the fact of it is, age is doin' the work for me. The day was when I axed no odds of any one, and, in fact, I have yit to find my equal."

As he concluded, he again raised his rifle and leveled it upon the savage. Loomis saw that the long barrel was immovable. He saw it spit forth its deadly contents. He heard a death-yell, and, turning, saw that both the face of Amy and her captor had disappeared from the fork of the cottonwood. Be-

yond the tree a few feet he saw a red hand—the hand of the savage—beating the earth in the throes of death.

Out in the grove the shrill whinney of a horse and the deep bark of a dog were heard to follow the clear ring of the old man's rifle.

Major Loomis uttered a cry of agony, and regardless of the consequence, he ran to the bank, sprung down the steep lights, and crossing the water, soon gained the opposite shore. A few steps carried him to where the savage and Amy lay upon the earth, the former dead—shot through the eye by the unerring rifle of the mysterious old borderman, the latter in a swoon.

The major took in the whole situation at a single glance, and, with a cry of thanks, he lifted the form of his child in his arms and made good his escape back to his friends, who hailed him with shouts of joy.

Although it has required some time for us to record the facts, all the events that transpired after the pursuers reached the creek up to the time of Amy's rescue, followed each other in such rapid succession that scarcely three minutes were occupied in the transaction of the whole. But by this time the savages approaching over the plain were within fifty rods of the creek, which fact admonished the whites of the necessity of a hasty retreat. So not a moment was lost in mounting, and putting their half-jaded animals in motion.

But, just as they started, Major Loomis happened to think of the old borderman, to whom the rescue of his daughter was doubtless owing, and whom, in the excitement of the moment, he had nearly forgotten. He stopped and turned toward the thicket, but the old man was not to be seen.

"Stranger, where are you?" called the major, but there was no response; and as there was not a moment to be lost, Loomis turned and rode rapidly away after his friends, with Amy in his arms.

A wild, savage yell behind, suddenly told them that the dead warrior had been found, and filled with renewed fears, the white men pressed their animals to their utmost speed.

CHAPTER II.

THE OUTLAWS AND THE VAGRANT.

Down from the direction of the Black Hills, at a wild, break-neck speed, galloped three horsemen, whose faces wore the flush and excitement of dangerous adventure. That it was a trio of reckless, daring fellows was evident from more than one fact. They were dressed in a peculiar kind of uniform, highly ornamented with gold lace and trimmings. Two of them wore their hair shaven close to the scalp, while broad-brimmed hats surmounted their heads. The third man, and evidently the leader of the gang, wore his hair long as a woman's. He was a model of perfect manhood in form, but his features wore a look of sensuality and dissipation. His eyes were of a dark gray color, cold and fierce in expression. A heavy black mustache shaded his mouth, and this, with the long goatee that hung to his breast, gave him a fierce, piratical look. His hat was looped at one side and fastened with a blazing star of gold. A belt with a heavy gold buckle girded his waist. Silver-mounted revolver-buttresses peeped from their receptacles on his hips. In fact, there was a mine of gold distributed about the men and their outfit, which, of itself, was evidence of that vulgar pride so characteristic of the gambler and brigand.

The leader of this little band was known as Prairie Paul, the Pirate of the Gold Hills. Just what this appellation implied, only those who dwelt within reach of the prairie pirate could fully know. He was just from his hidden home among the fastnesses of the Black Hills, and straight toward a little clump of trees on the banks of the Beaver he held his way.

To reach the creek required but a few minutes' riding; then they turned, and entering the grove, rode into a little opening and drew rein.

Prairie Paul gazed around him as though he expected to find some one there; but being disappointed in this, he dismounted and burst into a stormy passion.

"Not an infernal red-skin or white-skin here yet, and we are an hour late. This is how that accursed White Bear has kept his word with me, and, by heavens, he shall make amends for it with his blood!"

"Perhaps our not being on time, captain," said one of his companions, "accounts for the white chief's absence? He may have come and gone again."

"We're but an hour late."

"I know, captain; but a red-skin is a great stickler for such things—always punctual."

"Blast a red-skin that is so particular. I hate such dramatic precision in any man. Why, even the inexorable law of our land is less stringent. If we were to have been here at precisely one o'clock to attend a tribunal of justice, it would have been one o'clock until it were two."

"Well, we can wait awhile, and see what turns up. Perhaps White Bear is late as well as we are, and will yet put in an appearance?"

With a muttered oath, the captain threw himself upon the ground, and hitched his animal to a tree. His two companions followed his example; then the three threw themselves upon the sward beneath the shadows of a majestic tree.

"I am afraid something has gone wrong with White Bear," said Captain Paul, "else he would have been here ere this."

"Perhaps he failed in carrying out his plans for the capture

of the hunter's daughter. Her friends may have given him a reception that materially changed his programme. I'll bet you that old Major Loomis is no numb-skull on the prairie if he roughed all through the Pike's Peak campaign, as our spy informed us that he did."

"If a dozen hunters can whip a hundred well-armed red-skins, I think the latter had better exchange their weapons for their wives' petticoats, and let the women take the war-path."

"Well, but you know, my dear Paul, that sometimes a very small number can whip quite a force. For instance, take that Niobrara affair in which a dozen men knocked the trotters from under more than a cool hundred red-skins and—prairie regulators."

"Curse that affair!" exclaimed the outlaw chief, starting as though pierced by a dagger; "haven't I told you never to mention that again?"

"Of course, but then it came so handy by way of illustration, that, to save me, I couldn't help touching upon the matter. You're so sensitive, captain. You had ought to have been a woman."

"Tom, you like to twit me about my meanness," replied the captain, "but, man, I'd give a quart of precious dust to see a more wicked, heartless scoundrel on the face of the globe than your honorable self—you, Tom Jackson."

"After all, captain, what has either of us done so terribly criminal?"

"Ah! drawing in your horn, now, ain't you?" laughed the captain. "Of course *you've* never done anything wrong, you sweet-scented angel. Oh, no! I reckon you don't know you are trespassing this minute on the Sioux reservation?—running a gold mine of your own in the very heart of the forbidden ground? I reckon you don't know you are preparing yourself for the gallows by inciting peaceably inclined red-skins to deeds of—"

"Captain, who's doing all this talkin'? Moreover, who's digging all this gold? doing all this trespassing?—all this devilry in general?"

"Well, joking aside," said the captain, calmly, "we haven't done any direct meanness for some time, unless keeping on the good side of the red-skins might be considered naughty. It's true, we used to relieve the Pike's Peakerites of some of their surplus pickings, and now and then a horse; but that confounded Union Pacific railway busted our cruising along the overland and sent us hereaways. And, I must say, it has been a good thing for us, after all; for, by means of it, we stumbled across those rich pickings up among the Black Hills."

"Yes, besides, it has kept us out of bloody mischief," replied Jackson; "but I'm of the candid opinion that we'll have to fight like Turks if we hold the Black Hills gold secret much longer. If it is true that a scientific exploring party, under General Custer, is coming into the hills, it will be impossible for them to miss our ranche. Of course, they can't help but find gold, and then the news will bring a horde of miners swarming in upon us, and then, good-by, gold-pickings."

"But the government will not allow miners to enter the Indian reservation, don't you see? In case a few of them should come in, we could spur the Indians up to drive them out."

"It will be an easy matter for the government to effect a treaty that will open the hills to the world," the pirate chief-tain responded. "I'll bet the train we are now figuring after is that of a private exploring party, headed for the interior of the hills. Of course, we are not going to molest them, nor provoke the Indians to anything that would bring a military chastisement upon them, for fear we might jeopardize our own precious heads."

"You're a philosopher, captain, a sage philosopher, and look at things in a natural, philosophical way; and now, I—"

He did not finish the sentence, which was here cut short by a sudden movement of their animals, denoting alarm.

All bent their heads and listened. They heard the heavy tramp of hooved feet approaching. They started to their feet and gazed about them. The sorriest, saddest-looking spectacle imaginable burst upon their view. It was an old man with a bent form, a thin, bearded face, a sharp, eagle-shaped nose, and a wide mouth—the whole forming a combination of the most ludicrous and comical kind. He was dressed in a suit half savage and half civilized, and carried an old, long-barreled rifle, whose stock was wrapped and tied with strings, evidently to keep it from parting company with its ancient friend, the barrel. He carried no other weapons, excepting a knife, that were visible upon his person.

This odd specimen of humanity was mounted upon a horse apparently more venerable and infirm than himself. It was caparisoned with a rope around the neck for a bridle, and an old Indian blanket for a saddle. It was lame in one fore-leg, and halt in the two hind ones. It was apparently deaf and blind, and so old and infirm that it had lost all its animal instinct. It hobbled along, at times on three legs, with no little difficulty. And, to complete the outfit, a villainous-looking dog sneaked along, with head and tail down, at the horse's heels, looking as guilty as though he had just quitted a sheepfold.

To their surprise, the outlaws saw that the old trio was about to pass without seeing them, and so Prairie Paul called out:

"Hullo, there! whither away, my gay cavalier?"

The old man started quickly, and opening his half-closed

eyes, gazed around him. The look upon his face, and the movements that accompanied it, provoked the freebooters into an outburst of laughter.

"Whoa, now!" exclaimed the old man, drawing sharply on the rope as he caught sight of the three men.

The horse came to a dead halt, and the wolfish cur at his heels crouched sulkily down, watching the outlaws suspiciously out of the corners of his bloodshot eyes.

"How do you do, old pilgrim?" shouted Prairie Paul, with a half-suppressed smile upon his lips.

"Hey?" asked the old man, leaning slightly forward and making an ear-trumpet of his hand.

"How are you, I say?" vociferated Prairie Paul, at the top of his brazen lungs.

"A leetle louder, please," was the startling response; "caught cold last night and my hearin's a leetle thick."

"I should think so," said Paul, in an undertone, then advancing to the old man's side, he fairly screamed in his ears: "A fine day this."

"Oh, yez—yez!" stammered the old fellow, "she's a good ole mare—a little thin just now; and then everybody don't call her a fine bay. Some say brown, some chestnut. She is a fine bay, though."

The outlaw captain swore furiously, while his two companions roared with laughter.

"This is the most helpless case I ever run across," exclaimed Prairie Paul. "I'll make one more desperate effort. Who are you, old man?"

"Ben Franklin Adders my name," replied the man, with a look that implied some doubt as to whether he had heard the question aright.

"Ben Franklin Adder," repeated the outlaw chief, musingly; "an appropriate name, I should think, for I have always heard that adders were deaf. But," to the old traveler, "are you a hunter? or a scout? or what?"

"Yes, oh, yes; I'm traveling up north to Iowa."

"Up north to Iowa? I'll be hanged if that doesn't beat anything I ever heard for lamentable ignorance! I'm inclined to think, boys, that B. F. Adder's brain as well as his hearing is affected. Look at that horse, and that ornery-looking cur, and that old rifle held together with strings. Isn't that an outfit for the plains of Dakota? Great Gehosophat! It would be a splendid subject for the artist of a comic almanac. See here, old pilgrim, Iowa is south-east of here, not north."

"Yez—yez," stammered Adder, "my nag's awful tired and fretful, and wusser than all, she's lame into one leg as a crow."

"The old vagrant!" blustered Captain Paul; "the case is a hopeless one, and I'll be cussed if I am going to split my lungs trying to converse with him."

The three outlaws turned aside and sat down again.

Ben Franklin Adder, seeing their movement, at once dismounted, and giving his mare the freedom of the reins, turned and sat down also. The animal hobbled away a few paces and began browsing among the shrubbery, while the dog, crouching near, slept complacently with one eye open.

"Are you a hunter, old man?" one of the outlaws again ventured to ask, placing his lips near the old man's ears.

"Me? oh, no; I've been out to Platte river on a visit to my son, Tom Jefferson Adder. Tom's a big stock man out there, and a mighty smart boy, is that very Tom."

"Takes after his father, I presume," yelled Prairie Paul.

The old man acknowledged the compliment with a bow of the head and a smile of thanks.

"He thinks you meant just what you said," remarked Jackson, in an undertone.

"Any news from out on the Platte?" roared Paul.

"Oh, yez, certainly; Tom Jefferson—that's my son—got one of the finest bulls in America t'other day. He calls him the Duke of Coronation. He's imported, is that bull—brought from Texas. Lordy, but you'd ort to see him; he's so slick a fly'd scoot right off his back. It's a fact; I see'd a bushel of dead flies and muskeeters layin' on the ground whar 'Slick-sides,' as I called the bull, had stood. They'd lit on him and slid off and broke their necks. Oh, Moses! you'd ort to ride over to Tom Jefferson's some day and see that bull, strangers. And then he's some fine hoss-critters, too, that are regalar squackers. Tom's a great feller for fine stock."

"Just like his venerable sire, again," said Paul to his comrades, at the same time pointing in a significant manner at the old mare and sneaking cur.

"The old fellow had better be in the lunatic asylum than wandering around here on the plains of Dakota in such a plight," said one of the outlaws, sympathetically.

Further words were here cut short by the dog starting up, with a loud bark.

The old man sprung to his feet and turning upon the dog exclaimed, savagely:

"Git down thar, Beamer! keep still, thar; do you want to tear something up, ye voracious critter?"

The outlaws roared with laughter at the ludicrous figure cut by the decrepit old man and his dog; but the next moment their attention was drawn aside by sight of a number of mounted Indians coming into the grove from the east, directly toward them.

CHAPTER III.

THE GREAT "EXTARMINATOR."

THE old tramp, Ben Franklin Adder, was, for the time being, forgotten by the three outlaws, who directed their attention to the new-comers.

The savages, of whom there were six, under a young chief called Fast-foot, rode up and at once dismounted, which act was proof of itself that they were there to meet Prairie Paul by appointment.

As the last of the party rode up a look of bitter disappointment overspread the face of the outlaw captain. This, however, soon gave way to anger and indignation, and approaching Fast-foot he demanded—speaking the Indian's dialect:

"Where is the white chief, White Bear?"

"He is far away from here," replied the young chief.

"Why has he not kept his appointment and met me here?"

"His luck has been bad. He promised to meet the pale-face captain here with the white lily that blooms in the camp of the hunters now crossing the plains in white-topped lodges that move on wheels."

"Well?" demanded the freebooter, impatiently.

"He attacked the train. He sent Cunning Fox into the emigrants' lodges," continued the chief. "The Fox stole one of their horses, and then the white maiden. On the horse he fled with his prize; but the friends of the maidens pursued him, and at the Lone Tree Grove he abandoned his horse and waded the creek. Behind the Lone Tree he concealed himself to wait the approach of White Bear, who was coming down the plain. But before he reached the creek Cunning Fox was killed, and the white lily was carried back to her friends. In the pursuit White Bear's horse fell and hurt him badly. He cannot ride. He waits the orders of the young captain. He will yet keep his promise. He wants the young captain to make new appointments."

Prairie Paul stroked his mustache fiercely. The cloud upon his face grew darker. He muttered a savage oath; then for a minute or more he paced to and fro beneath the trees, his eyes bent to the ground in deepest thought. Finally he turned to the chief and asked:

"Can I see White Bear?"

"You cannot. He is wounded, and at a place where the presence of the white captain would rouse suspicion. If the Sioux get their annuities, they must keep on good terms with the Great Father at Washington."

Again was the prairie freebooter silent. It was evident from this conversation that a portion of the Sioux tribe was carrying on a series of depredations, in connection with the outlaws, which they wished to keep secret from the main authorities of their tribe, as well as from the agents of the general government. Outlaws of civilized society have no trouble in finding plenty of followers among the savages, and the two elements of outlawry together generally manage to keep the Indians in trouble with the government.

"Have you heard," Fast-foot finally continued, "that the great general of the pale-faces, with many mounted soldiers, is coming into the reservation?"

"I have heard rumors to that effect," replied the captain, "but will the young men of the Sioux tribes allow them to escape alive with the secret of the hidden wealth of the Black Hills? Will they let a handful of soldiers go away with the news that will bring thousands and thousands of miners in to drive you from your hunting-grounds?"

"What else can they do?" asked the chief, seriously.

"Ah, Fast-foot! you can prevent it; you can destroy them all if you will. You know all the hiding-places among the hills and the rocks. You could conceal yourselves there and as the soldiers pass shoot them down with your long-range rifles. Then their fine horses and equipments would be yours."

Fast-foot was silent and thoughtful. It was quite evident that he was favorable to the outlaw's suggestions, and was weighing the matter in his mind. Prairie Paul knew the weak points of the savages, and usually attacked them there in such a manner as was sure to carry the day. He was a systematical rogue, deep and cunning enough to keep the "pot boiling" in the Indian camp all the time, and yet escape identity as the general "fireman."

Meanwhile, the rest of the savages and the two outlaws had turned their attention to Ben Franklin Adder. Urged on by the whites, the red-skins became rather demonstrative toward the old borderman and his animals. The mare and dog, however, were inclined to be a little cross and resentful, the former sending out a heel now and then in a very wicked manner, while the latter growled a savage threat. But the simple-minded old man accepted all as one would flatter compliments.

Prairie Paul finally sat down and taking a memoranda book from his pocket tore out a leaf, upon one side of which he sketched, with a pencil, a miniature map. On the other side he wrote in cipher an explanation to the map. When it was completed he folded it carefully, and, handing it to Fast-foot, said:

"Here, chief, is a document which I want you to give to White Bear. He alone can read it. Guard it with your life, Fast-foot, for it is the key to the Gold Hills' secret and our future success."

"Fast-foot will not forget," replied the young chief, and removing his moccasin he placed the paper carefully away inside of it, then replaced the covering on his foot. "Ugh!" he exclaimed, with an air of satisfaction, "safe there—nobody

find him now." Then turning to his warriors he continued: "Fast-foot is mounted upon a fleet horse, and will depart at once for the lodge of White Bear. My braves can follow at will."

So saying, he advanced to where his pony was hitched, and mounting it he rode rapidly away—out of the grove and across the plain.

For a moment all eyes followed the young chief's rapid departure, but, when he had disappeared from view, attention naturally gravitated toward Ben Franklin Adder. To the surprise of all, the old vagrant had mounted his mare and was about to depart.

"Hullo there, old philosopher! are you going to leave us?" yelled the outlaw chief.

"Yez—yez—going," said the old fellow, and his mare started off at a limp, and the dog took his place at her heels.

"Hold on a moment; don't tear yourself off like a hurricane!" said the pirate.

The Indians started toward the old man, but he straightened himself up and uttered a clear, ringing laugh that fairly astonished the enemy. It even seemed to have a magical effect upon his animals. The mare raised her head, opened her eyes and sniffed the air as if with affright; while the dog pricked up his ears and barked and capered around uneasily.

"Captain," said Tom Jackson, in a quick voice, "that old vagrant has been deceiving us. He is not the fool he pretends to be."

"I believe it, Tom," replied Prairie Paul; then to the old man he continued, drawing his revolver: "Hold! stand! or I'll fire."

"Sc—at, Patience!" yelled the old borderman, and that instant the lameness of the mare vanished, and like a dart she shot away through the woods.

Bang! went the outlaw's revolver, and it was immediately followed by the clash of a dozen other shots. But the old man escaped them all unharmed.

"To horse, men! we've been duped!" cried Prairie Paul, vaulting into the saddle.

The next moment all were mounted and thundering away in pursuit of the cunning old vagabond. They emerged from the woods to find the fugitive some sixty rods away, and with a yell they lashed their animals to their utmost speed.

The race became one of fearful interest, especially to the pursuers, for they found, after a mile chase, that they were not gaining a foot upon the fugitive, who, ever and anon, turned his head and swinging his cap in the air, hurled back yells of defiance. And at length he came to a sudden, dead halt, and facing toward the pursuers raised his rifle and fired. Prairie Paul's horse sunk dead under him, and his friends, believing he was killed himself, drew rein and went back.

The old man on the prairie uttered a yell of triumph, then away he went, reloading his rifle as he galloped along.

Tom Jackson dismounted and gave his horse to the infuriated captain, who, mounting, dug his roweled heels into the animal's sides, and again started in wild pursuit of the enemy. But, no sooner were they all fairly under way, than the fugitive again whirled his animal toward the foe, and, raising his rifle, fired. Again Prairie Paul's horse sunk dead under him, and again the chase was interrupted. The outlaw's fury knew no bounds. He cursed with impotent rage; he cursed himself, his companions and the author of his rage. The second outlaw dismounted and gave up his horse to his master, when the chase was again resumed. The fugitive soon put a safe distance between himself and pursuers, when, for the third time, he drew rein, faced about and fired at the foe. This time a savage uttered a frightful scream, and reeling upon his horse, finally rolled lifeless to the ground; while the pony, maddened by the scent of the blood, that spurted from the bullet-hole in his master's naked breast upon his withers, dashed away over the plain.

The savages all drew rein to assist their fallen friend; but Prairie Paul cared nothing for the savage, and pressed on in hot pursuit, never once thinking that he might be placing himself at the old borderman's mercy. Vengeance alone filled his wrathful breast.

Before he could get his rifle reloaded and fairly under way, the fugitive found that the outlaw chief was within fifty yards of him. But, speaking to his mare, she shot away and soon widened the distance between them.

Prairie Paul drew his revolver and banged away in rapid succession at the old fellow, but without visible effect.

The Indians and two outlaws were now far behind—even hidden from view behind a swell in the plain. Prairie Paul was the only one pursuing, and not until he saw the old man draw rein and turn toward him with uplifted rifle, did he comprehend the foolhardiness of his efforts. To make the best of a bad situation, he checked his animal and dropped himself in the tall grass at its feet. But, at the same instant, the old man's rifle rung spitefully out, and his horse fell dead at his side.

Something akin to fear now seized upon the outlaw. Quickly he sprung to his feet, expecting to see the deadly, terrible old enemy come charging back upon him; but he was happily disappointed, and his fears assumed a different feeling when he discovered the enemy calmly seated astride his mare reloading his rifle with a *sang froid* that was audacious. They were not over fifty yards apart, and Prairie Paul would have given his right hand for one shot at the old trickster with his trusty rifle. But, alas! he had left his rifle behind, and every chamber of his revolver was empty. He was completely at the man's mercy. Judge of his terrible fury when he heard the provoking old sinner shout forth in clear, ringing tones:

"Good shootin' that, war'n't it, captin? I ain't as deaf as I war, am I? I ar'n't a fool, by a long shot, be I? And Patience, my mare here, and Humility, my dorg thar, are not so slouchy arter the sound facts are known, are they? Hol! hol! hol! captin; do you know what you've been foolishin' with? Do you know you've got yourself into an excrooshiatin' deefickilty? Do you know you're in the vicinity of a yearthquake?—a tornado?—a cholera plague? I are ole Dan Rackback, I are. But take me, and Patience, my mare here, and Humility, my dorg thar, and then, captin, you have ole Dakota Dan, the great Triangle—the great red-skin extarminator of the Nor'-west! We've just come up, fresh as a Johnny-jump-up, from New Mexico. But now, we're off for the Gold Hills a-boomin'; so by-by, captin," and turning his animal's head northward, old Dakota Dan galloped away over the plain in the direction taken by the young chief, Fast-foot, leaving the outlaw chief standing alone on the prairie, cursing with impotent rage.

CHAPTER IV.

THE VULTURES' QUEST.

FOR several moments Prairie Paul stood motionless upon the plain, his terrible feeling of vengeance seeking expression in words alone, as he watched the author of his troubles galloping away. He was perfectly helpless now, and completely at the mercy of the old man, though the latter seemed to have no designs upon his life, but kept straight on northward, and soon disappeared behind a swell in the great ocean of grass.

The savages on horseback, and the two outlaws on foot, finally made their appearance in the distance, moving slowly. They had the dead savage in charge, consequently were unable to move faster than a walk. As soon as they saw Prairie Paul standing alone on the grassy waste, they knew he had met with another difficulty, and so the two outlaws hurried forward and joined him.

"What now, captain?" asked one of the men, as they approached within speaking distance.

"Why, my brave Spartans, we're a trio of fools—blind idiots, that's what's the matter," was the savage response of the ill-humored freebooter.

"Not so bad as that, I hope."

"Yes, if any difference, worse; we've been blubbering like a pack of fools around one whom we took for a wandering lunatic, when, come to find out, *we're* the lunatics. That old wretch is one of the most noted and daring scouts and rangers on the western plains. That very Benjamin Franklin Adder is old Dakota Dan, and you know who and what that man is."

"By hearsay, I do; but you must be mistaken, cap. Old Dakota Dan left the north some four or five years ago."

"Well, s'pose he did? couldn't he come back again after he'd killed all the fools in Texas and New Mexico? And didn't he have the audacity to set out yonder on that crow-bait of a flying-shuttle and tell me that he was just up from New Mexico like a spring rosebud?"

"Hounds of fury?" exclaimed Jackson, in astonishment.

"Yes, you see it's the truth—*we're* the fools," continued Paul. "All that deafness; all that coinage about his son's fine stock so elaborately polished off, until I could see that each of you had a blooded horse in your mind's eye; and I daresay, those strings on that old, unerring rifle, were all salt to catch us with. And, magnificent sheepheads that we were, we played right into his hand. Of course, the conversation that occurred between us and Fast-foot will be heralded to the ears of the military, and then, good-by Gold Hills. The chances are that Doc Prince, and his party, have fallen into that old scavenger's clutches, else they'd been around before this."

"Well, I'm completely astonished," averred Jackson.

"Yes, and you'll be more astonished before we get through with that old prairie vagrant. Now, here we are, three pretty birds in full plumage, strutting around out here twenty miles from no place, with our wings clipped, as it were, and smarting under the blow dealt us by that infernal outfit of deception—Dakota Dan."

"You should feel thankful, captain, that he did not put a bullet through your corporosity."

"That he did not is the surprise of the day, for I was completely at his mercy. But I presume he wants to use me for a fool again, I was so cheap this time. But hereafter, count me poison on prairie vagrants."

Tom Jackson and his companion laughed heartily at their captain's savage discomfiture. Finally one of them asked:

"Well, this won't pay; what shall we do?"

"Plod gayly back to the hills, like festive pilgrims," said Paul, sarcastically. "Shades of Solomon! won't the boys just burst their boots a-laughing when they see us come marching into camp, afoot? But if the pill is bitter, we've got to swallow it down; so come—let's be ambling away, my gay cavaliers."

So saying, the three men began their slow march across the plain, going in the direction taken by Dakota Dan. A walk of many weary miles was before them and as they moved along they discussed the events of the day, in bitter tones.

They had journeyed half a dozen miles or more when the restless, roving eyes of Tom Jackson caught sight of a number of dark objects away off northward above the horizon.

They were buzzards, and to experienced plainsmen—as were the outlaws—there was a significance in the presence of the birds not to be overlooked. The three men knew that something on the plain beneath the birds attracted their attention.

"They're not flying straight, you see," said Paul, "but are rising and falling in spiral circles. Now, there is either some carrion there on the prairie, or else they are hovering along, vulture-like, upon the trail of a band of Indians or whites. If the former, it may be White Bear's band, but if the latter, it may be a party of soldiers, and the birds are following in hopes of feasting on dead horse, or—"

"If they'll just flap their somber wings down this way, they'll find the carcasses of some very fine horses already prepared," observed Jackson, facetiously.

Prairie Paul's brow darkened and he growled savagely under his mustache at the reminder of his loss.

The three moved carefully forward, keeping as much as possible in the lowlands, and watching closely the movements of the vultures in the air. And as they continued on they found that the birds maintained a single position over the plain.

Other winged scavengers had appeared in the air, miles behind the outlaws, but these they knew had been attracted there by the carcasses of their slain horses, and so they experienced no uneasiness from that source. But they were considerably puzzled over the cause of the attraction of the birds before them, and pressed onward with extreme caution.

Finally they approached near enough to the vultures to see that, whatever it was they were after, was hidden from view in the tall grass.

The trio came to a halt and consulted as to whether it was best to advance or not. They knew not what danger awaited them in the rank grass. They noted every movement of the birds closely, and finally came to the conclusion that nothing living was there to offer them violence. The vultures, gradually settling nearer and nearer the earth, told them this much, and so they moved carefully on. Crouching in the tall grass till hidden from view, they stole noiselessly along toward the point around which the buzzards seemed to be attracted. As they neared the place their hearts beat wildly with suspense. Carefully they parted the grass before them and peered on ahead with distended eyes, as if dreading to see some horrible sight, yet led on, by some terrible fascination that they could not resist, to its discovery.

The vultures discovered them in the grass, and soaring aloft, winged their way off in affright.

The freebooters had crept along nearly half a mile when they came to where the grass had been trodden down in paths by horses' feet. A few paces still further on they ran suddenly across the lifeless form of a savage lying in the grass with a bullet-hole in his naked, brawny breast.

A chief's insignia was upon his head.

One glance at the face, already bloating in the sun, and a fearful execration burst from Prairie Paul's lips.

He recognized the face of the dead! It was that of Fast-foot, the chief!

CHAPTER V.

"SICK 'IM, PUP!"

"I'll larn 'em, I will, sure as water runs down hill," mused Dakota Dan, as he galloped away from the presence of the outlaw chief. "I'll let 'em know that I'm a' imported *deefickilky*—that ole Dakota Dan, the great Triangle, are a hurrican in the disguise of a zephyr. Age is tellin' on us, it are true man, hoof and howler are not so young as we war once; but then, our faculties are still good. My ole eyes ritches out handsomely yit, Patience jogs along right pearly, an' Humility ranges jest 'bout as well as when a two-year ole pup. Criminy! we're good for several more races, tussels and fights yet—and, while I think about it, there's that chief Fast-foot, friends, that we've got to look after. He's got a leetle docky-mint in his gaiter that may be of value to us or somebody. So, peg it down, Patience, for the varlet's got considerably the start on us. Sail right into it, ole lightnin', for I know you're feelin' purty fresh and skittishy."

The mare seemed to fully comprehend the words addressed to her, and at once quickened her pace—gliding along the great brown ocean of grass with remarkable speed.

Meanwhile, the Sioux chief, Fast-foot, was moving across the plain at a slow, swinging gallop. He was mounted upon a pony more remarkable for endurance than speed. He felt no fears of danger, for he had assured himself that there were no enemies in the immediate vicinity. He carried a rifle, a knife and a tomahawk, with all three of which he was a skillful hand. He was a shrewd, wary and cunning chief. His cold, sullen countenance was that of the true savage. He never turned his head as he galloped onward, but kept his dark eyes on the plain before him.

Suddenly, however, his trained ear caught a faint sound behind him. He glanced back over his shoulder and discovered a horseman galloping down the hill directly toward him. He saw that he was a white man, for he was not over a hundred rods away. At a glance the chief recognized the man as he whom he had left at the grove with his friends.

For a moment the chief was undecided as to the course he

should pursue. He knew not the object of his pursuer, but he thought that he might have been sent after him by Prairie Paul, with some additional news for the chief, White Bear. This, however, he knew, upon second thought, was impossible for the old man and his mare were both laboring under apparent infirmities when he was in their presence. One thought begot another in rapid succession, until it finally occurred to the chief that there had been some deception about the old man—that he was an enemy in disguise, and so he urged on his pony to its utmost speed. But, despite his efforts to elude the old man, he found that he was gaining rapidly. The chase, however, continued a mile or more—until not over ten or a dozen rods separated them, when the Indian suddenly turned his pony to the right, and sweeping around, came to a halt after describing a half circle.

"S'render, you lopin' varmint!" yelled Dakota Dan, at the top of his lungs; "s'render, unconstitooshinly!"

The savage raised his rifle and fired, but as the old ranger was in motion, his bullet went wide of its mark.

"A bad shot, red-skin, a bad shot; and it leaves you in an excrooshiatin' *deefickilky*," shouted Dan, as he brought his mare to a stand; "we're after you, hot and heavy, and if you value your anatomy wuth the effort, you must come right down wuth that little paper in your slipper."

The chief sent back a defiant whoop, then began calmly reloading his rifle. He felt no fears of the feeble-looking old man.

"Be keerful, Ingin," cried the latter, raising his rifle, "don't tamper wuth a magazine I'm old, but I'm mighty. Go a leetle slow, chief, for I tell ye yer in the immejiate vicinity of a yearthquake—a rollin' thunderbolt—an excrooshiatin' *deefickilky*. I'm mortal pizen to red-skins—like May-apple to a hog. We three—that's man, hoof and howler—are what's called the Triangle—See here, ole doofunny, it's *my* shot!"

The old ranger saw that the savage was about to raise his rifle for a second shot, and as the distance between them was not sufficient to secure his safety from the enemy's bullet, he was compelled to act without a moment's hesitancy. Quick as the thought itself, he threw his rifle to his shoulder and fired. The red-skin's pony reared, and plunging forward, fell dead. In the confusion consequent upon the old man's shot, the savage's rifle was accidentally discharged, leaving him for the time being at the mercy of his enemy.

With a shout, Dakota Dan started toward the chief.

"Stand, red-skin!" he yelled, "for here we come a-boomin'—full tilt—stand, or we'll annyhilate you!"

The savage grasped his tomahawk. Dakota Dan drew a revolver from the bosom of his hunting-shirt.

Some twenty paces from the chief, Dan drew rein.

"Ingin, you must give me that paper in your boot," he said, in an expostulating manner; "I must have it—I will have it, and if you don't come right down with it, mind I tell ye, ye'll hear a queer rumblin' like a yearthquake."

"The old man speaks big words, but they are lies," retorted the savage, indignantly.

"Complimentary, you are, Ingin; but then the Rack-backs are not without their little faults as well as other old Puritan families. But I'm gittin' tired of this tongue-lashin', and mean bisness now. So I want you to plank over tht paper Prairie Paul give you, or true as there is a constitooshin, I'll let blizzer right into your system!"

"Fast-foot is not a coward."

"I daresay you're not, but then maybe you're not jist prepared to die, and your spiritual condition will make no difference wuth me. I want that paper, and you're in no condition to buck ag'inst a tornado; so now, out wuth it, or down goes yer meat house!" and the old man raised his revolver and leveled it at the savage.

With a yell the wily chief threw himself in the tall grass entirely out of sight; then he began crawling rapidly away on all-fours. But Dan could tell his exact location by the agitation of the grass, and thus kept himself posted as to the enemy's course. He believed the warrior was trying to escape, and dismounting, he ordered his mare to lie down in the grass for fear of a stray shot from the red-skin.

"Now, Humility, ole dog, is your time to set a tooth," the ranger said, addressing his dog; "I want you to take the red-skin's trail and rout him hoss and foot, and I'll be ready to dot him the instant he leaps cover. Here, take the trail, pup—sick 'im—hunt him up!"

Humility glided away through the brown grass, a perfect line of trembling blades indicating his course. The old borderman watched sharply for the contact of the dog and Indian, and was soon rewarded by seeing the latter leap almost full length above the top of the grass with Humility clinging, like a leech, to his loin-cloth. A yell, that fairly split the air, pealed from the startled Indian's lips.

With a broad, comical grin upon his bearded face, Dakota Dan bounded forward to his dog's assistance. He found the two struggling enemies upon foot, the savage spinning around and around like a top, in vain endeavor to get a hold of the animal. But the old dog was cunning enough for him and managed to maintain his hold upon the loin-cloth, and his position directly behind his foe.

When Dakota Dan caught sight of them, the scene presented was so ludicrous that he jerked off his old cap, slapped his thigh with it, and then haw-hawed with laughter.

"You are in an excrooshiatin' *deefickilky*, ar'n't you, red-skin? Makes ye dance gingerly, don't it? The pup's teeth pinch hard, don't they? Hold to him, Humility, ole dog! Don't let the varmint git behind hisself, or the Triangle'll be eternally ruined. You know, one part gone and the machine

won't hitch—can't work up tornadoes and yearthquakes—haw! haw! haw! Ingin, you caper around like a bug on a hot griddle. What makes ye tip-toe it so?—anything hot about yer system?"

This so enraged the savage that he made one desperate lunge forward and succeeded in breaking away from the fangs of the dog. One bound and he reached the point where the sudden attack of the beast had caused him to drop his tomahawk. Seizing the weapon, he turned upon the animal and attempted to brain it; but the uplifted arm fell helpless at his side—shattered by a bullet from Dakota Dan's revolver. Grasping the weapon in the other hand, the desperate savage made an effort to kill the old man, but another shot laid the painted wretch low in the agonies of death.

"There, there," mused the scout, in a half contrite tone, "it's over with again, and the Lord only knows how many times it makes in the history of the Triangle. We have no desire to know how many we have slain; we are sorry to know that we've had to slay any at all. But death is all that'll tame a red-skin—yes, all that'll bring 'em anyways near civilized life. But what's the use of us moralizin'? We didn't use to do it; but, ah! it's age; we're approachin' the eend of our journey; the Triangle 'll soon be off the trail forever, and it makes one begin to think 'bout footin' up accounts. But, fie! that red is deader'n a mummy. He provoked it himself. He wouldn't give up that dockymint, and so a *deefickilty* boarded him, and now thar he lays. So now, I'll look after the paper myself."

He advanced to the side of the fallen savage, and stooping, cut the moccasin from his foot. Inside of it he found the coveted paper, which he secured about his person, then mounting his mare, rode on northward at a slow, measured gallop.

CHAPTER VI.

THE LOST WAGONERS.

THE day had been fair, but with the going down of the sun the haze of Indian summer thickened into a heavy, foggy blackness, and this, with the shadows of night, enveloped the plain, its brown billows and wooded isles, in a shroud of purple gloom. But out of its Cimmerian depths human voices arose—voices full of animated life—voices whose tones were pitched in excitement and anger. And, added to these, were the rumble of wagon-wheels, the rattling of chains, the occasional crack of a whip and the tramp of hoofed feet.

A wagon was moving along the plains of Dakota at the dead hour of night—moving, whither the men that accompanied it knew not. They were lost; and yet they kept moving onward through the impenetrable night. At sunset they had descried a grove in the distance and had resolved to push on and reach it before going into camp. But, hours of travel through the darkness brought them not to the desired point, and they finally became bewildered and confused. Despite this fact, they kept on in hopes of striking a place where fuel and water could be procured.

"Any signs of timber ahead, Snowball?" asked one of the party of their African teamster.

"No mo' signs ob timbar dan ob daylight," was the response of the sable Jehu.

"Then we might as well halt right here for the night," said the first speaker, who was addressed as Prince DeLano.

"I'll swear I b'lieve I see a grove ahead," said a third speaker.

"Gor a'mighty!" exclaimed the darkey, "you can't no mo' see an inch through the darkness than you can into heaving. Come, g'long dar, Bess and Beauty; what for you shyin' off dat way? want to make somebody b'lieve you can see somethin'? Come, gee haw, g'lang," and the speaker rounded off his speech with a crack of his whip that rung sharply through the still, dark night.

"Let us move on a little further," said DeLano; "I don't want to pass this night without water for our animals or fuel to cook some food. If it wasn't for one thing we could rough it through on raw bacon and hard-tack, but you know, don't you, that we've got to have some delicacies?" and the speaker gave his companion a significant nudge in the side.

"Whoa, dar, Bess, you female fool you!" again scolded the African, giving the line a sudden jerk; "I'd jis' like to know what makes you skeeter 'long dar, dat way. I'll lick you black and blue directionly—hup, g'lang!" and again the crack of his whip stung through the night.

The darkey was mounted on the near-wheel horse and drove those forward with a single rein.

Four men, all in the prime of vigorous manhood, reclined in the forward end of the canvas-covered wagon, drawn by the four animals. That they were reckless, hardy fellows, full of the spirit of wild adventure, was quite evident from their very demeanor. That they were men of dissolute character, and given to dissipation, was, also, evident from their language. They affected indifference to their situation, although it was quite evident to Snowball that they were extremely anxious to reach a certain point before they came to a halt. The repeated complaints of the darkey about the darkness, and the fretfulness of his leaders, finally became annoying to the men, and they cursed the darkey for his stupidity and complaints, and even threatened him with violence in case he continued his grumbling.

The negro, however, was not as humble and obedient as the slave the four men would have him. He had imbibed some of their own spirit of independence and courage. He seemed fully cognizant of the fact that all men were created with the same free and equal rights, if not of the same color. Therefore, he resolved to exercise his rights, and embraced every opportunity to make reply to his employers' abusive language.

"I jis' tell you what's de matter, Massa DeLano," he said; "I don't know no mo' whar I's gwine dan a goose in de grass; and you jis' want to stop dat mean, ornery swearin' to dis nigger, or I'll jis' hop down and s'render de team to you. You jis' can't mule-drive me. De proclamashin ob Abe Linkin' sot dis nigger on an equal wid de white trash, and I's not gwine to have dat order violated."

"You are an infernal sensitive nigger," replied Prince, "but a chunk of cold lead—"

"Whoa, dar! what de fire and blixum ails you, ole critters?" stormed the darkey, addressing the horses; "I jis' tell you what it are, boss, you've got to git out ob dar and lead dat Bess mare, or I'll be inflated if I don't dismount and let you cipher it out alone in dis Gymson gloom. Talk 'bout a grove ahead! Why, it am all downstraight foolishness, dat am."

"Stop that grumbling, nigger, or, curse you, I will shoot you dead," returned Prince, and the click of a revolver accompanied his murderous threat.

"Whoa, Bess and Beauty, Dave and Dick," exclaimed the driver, whom the villain's words failed to intimidate in the least. Turning in the saddle he continued, "Massa Prince, I jis' swore like a' ole pirate dat I'd nebbber be 'posed on by de likes ob any white man as wa'n't a gemman. Now you's got to snake dat threat back, or I'll clomb down off ob dis hoss."

"Go on, I say, or I'll blow you to purgatory!"

"I won't budge a peg till you speaks like a gemman."

An oath escaped Prince's lips, and was succeeded by the report of his pistol and a groan of agony from Snowball's lips. Then in the blackness of the night was heard the heavy, sodden fall of a body upon the earth and the rumbling jar of the wagon-wheels over some obstruction, while the horses, becoming frightened at the terrible sounds, plunged away over the plain without a driver.

"By heavens, Prince, you have slain the negro!" said one of the villain's companions, "and the horses are going to the devil with us."

"I didn't mean to shoot the black dog," said Prince, excitedly; "I only aimed to frighten him. But we must try and stop these horses."

He advanced to the end of the wagon and endeavored to stop the running horses, but the sound of his voice, added to the rattling of the wagon, lent new terror to the horses' afright, and they ran onward all the more frightened.

The four men exerted every effort in their power to check the flying animals, but not until they were nearly exhausted did they succeed. Prince, the chief man of the party, managed, at the risk of his life, to walk out upon the wagon-tongue and mount the saddle-horse, or near-wheeler, when he had no difficulty in bringing the panting horses to a stand.

"There, now, curse you!" the man hissed between his set teeth; "stand, won't you? Boys, what are the casualties of this night's escapade?"

"A dead nigger, four scared and bruised men, and a general smash-up of things in the wagon."

"Devil take the nigger!" replied Prince, in a tone of affected bravado; "we can get along without his driving and insolence."

"But you can never boast again that you have never shed human blood," replied Bert Bertram.

"Well," replied Prince, evasively, "I believe that nigger was not a safe person to take into the hills."

"I always said that," responded Bertram; "but do you think we can apply the adage—'Dead men tell no tales'—to him, Prince?"

"The ball must have gone through his woolly pate, for I aimed to shoot through the top of his hat; and what the bullet failed in doing the wagon-wheels must have completed. I daresay the wolves will leave nothing at all to-night for the vultures to-morrow. But the question still before the house is—where are we?"

"Well, the runaway has confused me more than ever," replied Sol Ricord. "I couldn't say whether we are in Dakota or Montana territory—whether we are headed toward the Rocky Mountains or the Missouri river."

"I'll tell ye whar we are," said the facetious character of the quartette of worthies.

"Well, where?"

"We're lost."

Prince swore, and the other two laughed.

"I believe we are still right," said DeLano, "and shall undertake to steer this craft myself. Darkness or daylight, we want to reach a safe point."

So saying, the villain squared himself in the saddle and started up the team. They rattled and bumped along over the rough plain an hour or so in perfect silence so far as words were concerned.

The darkness seemed to thicken as night advanced. Those in the wagon could scarcely see the faintest outlines of their friend on the horse.

At times the heavy grass muffled the sound of the wheels and the horses' feet, and a comparative silence ensued, but only for a few moments.

Suddenly Prince drew up, saying:

"Trott, I wish you would get out and see what ails the off leader. 'Pears to me she's been lagging behind for some time, and acting rather queer. And once I really fancied I saw a man on her; but—"

Prince was here interrupted by an outburst of laughter from his friends.

Trott got out of the wagon and went around to the heads of the forward horses. A cry suddenly burst from his lips—a cry of startling surprise.

"What's the matter, Trott?" asked Prince.

"I'd ask that question, I would, by heavens!" was the startled response. "Why, Bess is gone! has been stolen right out of the harness from under our very noses! I don't doubt now, Prince, but what you *did* see a man on the mare. A pretty set of night tramps are we, by Judas!"

CHAPTER VII.

"HAIL, FELLOWS! WELL MET!"

SNOWBALL, the negro driver, was far from being dead at the time his fall was so lightly discussed by his assassin. In the darkness Prince DeLano had shot wide of his mark. But the quick-witted negro, acting upon the spur of the moment, uttered a groan of agony and threw himself on the earth between the horses, where the wagon could pass over him, rather risking the dangers of the animals' heels and the rolling wheels than the chance of a second shot from the outlaw's revolver.

To still further mislead his enemies in the belief that he had been killed outright, the wagon-wheels passed over a gopher-mound about the time he fell, and they were sure it was the lifeless body of their driver.

Snowball lay prone upon the earth, his body parallel with the course the team was pursuing, and the wagon passed over him and rattled on. Through fear, however, that his deception might be discovered, he lay perfectly quiet for some time; but when the sound of the wheels and the men's excited voices had died away in the distance, he ventured to open his eyes and gaze up into the purple gloom. But at this very instant he heard a soft rustling in the grass near him. A foot-step, light as a cat's, approached him. Then two dull, glowing specks of fire appeared but a few inches from the darkey's face. A warm, quivering nose was thrust down against his cheek, and the hot, fetid breath of an animal was breathed into his face.

Terror paralyzed the limbs of the African. He trembled from head to foot and his teeth chattered as if with an ague-fit. His first impression was that a huge bear stood over him, and he expected each moment to feel the creature's fangs tearing into his quaking form. He tried to speak, but his tongue was as if frozen. It occurred to him that a mental resolution to offer a prayer might give him control of his speech; but even this good resolution failed to take the silence out of his organ of speech.

"Bow-wow-wow!" suddenly burst like the deep crash of thunder over him, breaking the terrible spell that bound him in horror's chain.

"Oh, Lord!" burst involuntarily from the frightened negro's lips.

"Hullo! what now you got there, Humility, ole dorg?" came a queer, interrogative voice from out the darkness of the night.

"Bow-wow!" answered the dog over the prostrate negro.

Then a man was heard approaching with a quick, shuffling gait, through the dry grass, and the black man gathered nerve and strength enough to rise to a sitting posture.

"By the munificent Moses!" he heard the man say to himself as he came nearer, "the pup's got some poor devil thar, shure as water runs down hill."

"You's jist right, you be, stranger," said Snowball, taking courage from the friendliness of the man's tone.

"Well, now, who the Samuel-hill be you? What are ye doin' round here? Whar ye goin'?"

"Didn't ye hear dat wagging jis' now?" asked the darkey, rising to a sitting posture.

"I'm not deaf," was the laconic reply.

"And didn't ye hear dat pistol-shot?—and dat death-groan?"

"Edzactly."

"Well, sah, dat ornery Prince DeLano fired de shot, and I done de groanin', den I rolled off de hoss into de grass, and here I are; but I's not dead."

"So I perceive. But I s'pose you got yourself into a sort of deefickilty with yer friends."

"Don't know what dat is, but I know old Massa DeLano got mad as a hornit 'cause I wouldn't drive de team to soot him, and so he ups and bangs away at dis nigger."

"Nigger!—ugh!—humph!" ejaculated Dan. "I thought you looked a leetle dark in the night."

"Golly I can't see dat your 'plexion makes much ob a shine in de gloom. Guess, den, you's colored, too."

"No, I'm not a nigger; I'm Dakota Dan—that is, me and my mare, Patience, and my dorg, Humility. We are the great Triangle of the Nor'-west, we three are, and are in hunt of game, all the way from a red-skin to a nugget of gold. But, lookey here, darkey, who's in that wagon?"

"Prince DeLano, Bert Bertram, Thede Trott and another feller," replied Snowball. "They started out from Sioux City, and said dey war gwine to de Black Hills to hunt gold, and dey hired me and my mare Bess to go 'long with dem. I war to work de mare and do de drivin', and did so till dey try to kill me. But I jis' tell ye, 'Coaty Danyil, dey acts mighty strange sometimes. Dar's somethin' in de wagon dat dey guard like gold—never let dis nigger go 'bout it closer dan de hosses, and dey always kept de cover closed down. I know dey's a bad set ob men, for long arter I'd gone to sleep last night wid one eye open, a man, all fixed up—whew! come to camp, and de men called him Capting Paul—"

"Prairie Paul, I'll bet a land title in the vicinity of the North Pole!" interrupted Dan.

"Think I hear 'em call him dat name, Danyil," said the negro, scratching his woolly pate reflectively; "but as I was gwine to say, he come to camp, and dey all put der heads together, and talk, and talk, and talk, in low tones. But what dey talk 'bout, I couldn't tell, but knowed it war somethin' bad; and I's mortal glad I got away from dem. But dey's got my mare Bess, and dey nebber paid me for her, either."

"Then I'd have her away from them or bleed," said Dan.

"Dar's four ob dem and only one ob me."

"Say the word and we three 'll git her for you."

"What three am dat?"

"Myself, Daniel Rackback, my mare Patience, and my dorg Humility. We constitute the great Triangle of the Nor'-west. Patience, my mare, nigger, is the fastest and bestest critter that ever boxed soil in Dakota, and Humility, my dorg, as good as sniffed a trail or sunk a tooth."

"Don't dispoost wid you, 'Coaty Danyil, but if I had my mare Bess here, I'd beat you all to shucks a-runnin'."

"He! ho! ho!" laughed Dan. "Nigger, you don't know what yer sayin', do ye? You never seed a fast horse aside of my Patience. Why, she's a regler ole doofunny, and can outrun, outjump, outkick any thing this side of judgment day."

"Lookey here, Massa Danyil: I's a poor, lone ole nigger, here in de night on de prairie, and I don't want to git into a discomboborashin wid de only white man left on de plantation; but I know dat mare ob mine can jist beat you black and blue. Gum! but she's awful fast! I run her twenty miles once, down in I-o-wa, and I jis' tell you what's de matter, she went so fast dat folks thought dar war a string ob horses fur as dey could see, both ways. Dey seen her all along dat road in one holy second. Dat's de way Bess runs."

"Judea!" exclaimed Dan, "what a nateral-born liar you be, nigger! But then, I'll admit sich runnin' might be possible, and if so, it's awful fast. But you'd ort to see ole Patience Rackback on her dew-claws. Fire and tow! she's inspired lightnin'. The fastest she ever done war down on the plains of New Mexico, where something less'n two million Comanches got arter us, bent on our skulps. It was on a dark night—darker'n to-night, for instance. We lit out for safety, and great Judea! nigger—the air fairly sizzed along our trail, and smoke and sparks marked our path through the darkness—"

"What, from your pipe?—war you smoking?" interrupted the astonished Snowball.

"No, thunderation, no! They come from fast runnin' You see, Patience flashed along so like a meteor that the friction against the air and darkness came mortal nigh producin' spontaneous combustion."

"Oh, mortal Cæsars! Lor'! Lor'! I's done for. I'll give up, 'Coaty, dat you can beat the world whopping. You's de toughest pill I ebber tackled, but den if I ebber git my Bess mare from dem fellahs, I'll run you a big race jist to see how many miles you'll leave me behind in a hundred yards—whit! what dat noise?"

"Silence! silence!" demanded Dan.

Both listened intently. They heard a sound approaching them resembling the rumble and rattle of a wagon.

"By Judea, nigger!" exclaimed old Dan, "here comes yet men back like Satan beatin' tan-bark. They're lost and wanderin' about over the peraro like a set of fools. Now then, Snowdrop, if you'll swear that you'll stick to me through thick and thin till we find the train of Major Loomis, I'll engage to extricate your hoss from that team, or else you may have ole Patience."

"Golly, I's your huckleberry, Massa 'Coaty," replied the negro, with apparent delight over the bargain.

"Then just remain here, Snowflake, and don't budge one peg till ye hear me whistle, then come," said old Dan, and with this he turned and crept away.

The old ranger stole onward through the grass until he had gained a point near where he supposed he would intercept the wagon, when he came to a halt and threw himself along the earth.

The wagon soon came up. Dan could now hear the voices of the men in the wagon conversing in unguarded tones, and the driver cursing like a pirate.

When the team was near, the old borderman rose to his feet and crept swiftly, yet silently, toward it. The animals detected his presence and shied off, but, continuing to follow up, he soon gained the side of the off-leader. He put out his hand and touched the animal, then he patted her side. His touch seemed magnetic, for it at once relieved the mare of her uneasiness.

Soon as he had quieted the animal, and made sure he had not been detected by the man on the other side, he drew his

knife and cut the harness tugs and the straps that coupled the animals. This left the mare loose, but it placed other things in a condition that would soon call strict attention to it, and so no time was to be lost in getting away. The old man, keeping the horse between himself and enemies, took the mare by the bits and turned her aside, and allowed the wagon to pass by them.

The team, however, did not go more than two rods before it stopped. Dan stopped also, but he mounted the mare in order to be ready for flight, in case he should be discovered. Then he listened; he heard the driver order a man out to see what was wrong with the leaders. He heard the man's exclamation of surprise on finding one of the animals gone from the team; and he could scarcely suppress an outburst at the remarks that followed. He finally heard all the men get out and go around to where Trott stood, expatiating on their stupidity in the keenest sarcasm.

Again the spirit of mischief took possession of Dakota Dan, and the indomitable old man dismounted, and stealing up behind the wagon, crept around the corner, and with his fingers removed the linch-pin from the left wheel. Then throwing the pin into the grass, he hurried back into the gloom, and mounting the mare, rode off a few rods and stopped to await the result of his second trick.

Had the four outlaws been less furious and noisy over the loss of their animal, they might have heard the movements of the old borderman. Nothing was visible to them save the dimmest outlines of the tall topped wagon, and the horses, and to see these at all, one had to be upon the ground.

For fully half an hour the men stormed about, cursing the fate that had belated them, and the daring thief that had taken advantage of the gloom to steal their animal from under their very eyes. Finally they lit a lantern and upon making some search they found pieces of the harness-tugs hanging to the whiffletree. This told them that a keen-edged knife had severed the traces as well as the strap that coupled the mare to her mate; the matter was thoroughly settled in their minds. The animal had been stolen while the team was in motion. They did not believe, however, that Snowball had anything whatever to do with the theft, but that other enemies more dangerous, even were the negro alive, were abroad upon the plain.

This conviction gave the four villains great uneasiness, and putting out their light, they arranged the three horses to the vehicle and resumed their journey.

Dakota Dan heard the wagon start away, and he at once rode along after it to see the result of his second trick. He had not long to wait, nor far to go. Suddenly there was a crash. The wheel had slipped off the spindle, and the vehicle careened over on the corner. The men shouted, the horses plunged and reared in the harness with affright, and every board and timber in the wagon creaked and groaned under the straining twist it had been so suddenly thrown into. But, high above the din and confusion of all, rung a shrill, shrieking scream.

Dakota Dan started with an inward shudder of horror and surprise, for in the scream he recognized the voice of a female! Of this there was not a single doubt in his mind, and turning his animal's head, he rode rapidly back to where he had left Snowball and his two dumb companions.

There was work on hand for the Triangle!

CHAPTER VII

THE SIGNAL LIGHT.

WITH an ease that was evidence of his remarkable power of navigation in the dark, Dakota Dan made his way back toward the point where he had left Snowball, without a landmark of any kind to guide him.

"Dat you, 'Coaty Danyil?" asked the negro, as he approached within hearing.

"Yes, it are I, and here's yer Bess mare. I've been tryin' her bottom, nigger, and I'll admit she's fast, but she's no match for Patience, my mare. I took the critter right outen the harness, while the wagon war in motion, but blest if 'em fellers war long in finding it out, and then, oh, Judea! how they did git up and spit fire! But, Icicle, do you know thar is a female woman in that wagon?"

"A what?" exclaimed the darkey.

"A woman."

"Oh, Moses, Massa Danyil! I nebber dreamed ob sich a thing. You's mistaken, man."

"No, I am not; I heard a woman scream."

"Oh, good salvation!" exclaimed the darkey, scratching his woolly pate in perplexity, "den if dat's so, I knows why dey war so 'tickler' bout keeping de hind half ob de wagging all boxed up after dat fust night dat Captin' Paul visited our camp. Dis nigger thought he heard a gal's voice dat night, and some one a-sobbing as tho' her heart war bu'sted; but den I wa'n't sartin. Dey'd put out all de lights jist afore de captin' come, den dey always make me stay and sleep wid de horses, several rods away, and as every hoss had a bell on so's to keep me awake and half deaf, reckon dat am de reason I nebber knowed de trufe 'bout de contents ob dat wagging. Den I war too dimfounded thick-headed ebber to 'strust anything."

"Wal, it's a serious fact, nigger; and I can never sleep till I know who she is, and why she's thar, and whar she's goin'."

But then I know she's not thar of her own free will, or else you'd 'a' knowed it. Ah, me! the good Lord only knows how much devilry are goin' on in this world. It's awful, ar'n't it, Snowdrop?"

"Kind o' guess it is, massa."

"Wal, crime 'll receive its reward; thar's no whinin' 'bout that. The recordin' angel 'll miss nothin' in footin' up the general account, and I'm afraid the credit colim' will be light—won't balance—when God 'll have to squar' the sheet with his judgment. But then it's no use moralizin' here when thar's work to be done. I'll call Patience, my mare, and begin figgerin' and feelin' back toward that wagon; and, nigger, I want you to stand right up to the work like a man."

"I'll do it, Massa Danyil—I swan I will!"

Dan uttered a series of low whistles, and a few moments later his mare came up in answer to the familiar summons.

"Now, nigger, if you could only see in this dark, you'd see the slickest piece of hoss-flesh you ever perceived. This mare, Patience, is of the best of blood, and so are that 'ere dorg, Humility. Why, I can show papers tracin' their pedigree cl'ar back to Noah and the ark; and then talk 'bout beatin' that, will ye? Humph! Patience is as good a hoss-critter as ever ambled across the soil of Normandy, or kicked the eternal outen an Arab; and Humility is jist as segacious a critter as ever sunk tooth in a catamount. Remember this, nigger, as we jog along thro' life. But come—this won't do; I must know who's in that wagon aside them men-varmints. Let's lead up that way and see what they're doin' by this time, the royal tigers of Satan."

So saying, they moved away through the darkness, leading their animals. They had gone but a short distance when Dan stopped, and by a low exclamation imposed silence upon his companion.

Then to their ears came the "swish, swish" of grass, while beneath their feet they could feel the earth trembling, as if under violent and heavy concussions. The next instant a number of shadowy horsemen swept past them like the wind. They were going west, and, strange as it may seem, the feet of their horses made no more sound, aside from the swish of the grass, than if made by phantom feet. Snowball turned to Dakota Dan, and in a voice that trembled with fear, asked:

"Great mortality, Massa Dan! what dem—ghostses?"

"Think thar war a leetle flesh and blood 'bout that party of night-riders."

"Dar hosses' hoofses made no noise, tho'; why fore be 'dat, Massa Danyil?"

"Beca'se they've had their hosses' hoofs muffled—tied up in pieces of blankets. You've no idea what a difference it'd make to bundle up a hoss's hoofs. The fust time I ever seed it done war when I war on the western plains of Nubreska. I got into company with a pack of boy-rangers, under a feller called Idaho Tom, and I seed 'em fool a pack of Ingins that way—rid right onto the varmints and extinguished 'em. Judea, Snowdrop! if that Idaho Tom and his boys wer'n't the dare'nest set of fellers that ever walked the plains or climbed the mountains! Many's the brush we've had together with red-skins, and yer may plump down yer bottom dollar that we allers come out top canines in the fight. I'd give my interest in the brimstun' diggin's to have that boy and his band of young harem-scarem thunderbolts up here a few days. We'd regulate things here, you bet. We'd put the territory in a healthy condition purty quick; we'd prove a dose of salts to the red-skins and prairie freebooters. But, nigger, I shouldn't wonder if that band of hossmen wasn't the cattle you were with. I reckon they've muffled their animals' feet, and then mountin', struck out to s'arch the plain for the mean critter what stole their hoss and drew the linch-pin outen their wagon-wheel. If it is them, they're bigger fools than one'd take 'em for, and while they're away, we might slip in and explore their vehicle, and help that woman out of her deefic-kiltous predicament."

"Scissors! dis nigger wouldn't know which way to go now. It's completely inverted; I are, I swan."

"Thar! didn't you see that?"

A light flashed through the darkness away off, nearly a mile before them.

"Yes; seed dat plain as day," said the darkey.

"Well, that's our course—it was at the wagon. There it goes again—don't you see?"

Again the light appeared and remained in sight for fully a minute, swinging rapidly to and fro. When it ceased oscillating it rose and fell half a dozen times, then disappeared altogether.

"Oh, ho!" exclaimed Dan, "them war signals made with a lantern. You see now, don't you, nigger, that three of your men took to boss, while the fourth remained to signal the location of the wagon. See how it's done, don't you?"

"Can't see anything in dis darkness, Massa Danyil."

"Well, then you fully comprehend the possibiliousness of the case, don't you?"

Snowball sighed and mumbled an unintelligible answer.

Then the two continued on toward the wagon.

Slowly through the almost impenetrable labyrinths of the night they made their way.

The damp mist and dews of heaven were settling earthward, deadening even the rustle of the grass.

Never in all his adventurous life did Dakota Dan experience such gloom and silence—gloom and silence that seemed born of infinity.

When he supposed he was near the wagon, the old ranger stopped and said:

"Nigger, I now want you to plant yourself right here like a

stone statyoo, and stay here till I run out and make a reconnoissance. If I should stumble into a red-hot squabble, I'll give the yoop, and then you can come around and give me a boost. Keep pu'fectly still and don't get impatient. Patience is the door to a borderman's success—in fact it's the only avenue through which anything can be reached that requires the action of time to develop. Oh, ho! light ahead again, so here goes."

A dull, red light, scarcely brighter than a phosphorescent glow, shone through the darkness. It appeared to be somewhat elevated, which left no doubt in the old ranger's mind that it shone through the canvas cover of the outlaws' wagon. At any rate, he made his way directly toward it, and as he ascended and descended the slight undulations of the plain, the light seemed to rise and fall, approach and recede with the turing deception of a will-o'-the-wisp.

CHAPTER IX.

"SILENCE OR DEATH!"

STRAIGHT toward the fickle, changing light, hanging above the plain, Dakota Dan made his way, moving rapidly, yet silently, with every faculty on the alert for danger.

He had left his rifle strapped upon Patience's back, but with his revolver firmly grasped in a steady hand, he was ready for any emergency.

Suddenly the sound of a voice fell upon his ears. He stopped and listened. The light, which a moment before he had lost sight of, now appeared but a few rods away. And true enough, it shone through the canvas cover of the wagon, inside of which he could now see the shadow or outlines of a human form, or rather the head and shoulders of one. They were so indistinct, however, that Dan could not tell whether they belonged to a man or woman. Just beyond the wagon a few paces three or four men were engaged in conversation, and near them horses could be heard munching the dry grass.

"Dod-burn the varmints, they've all come in," mused the old borderman, reflectively, "that is, if they war out. Them fellers that went gallavantin' apast me and the nigger might 'a' bin some one else 'sides the outlaws; they might 'a' bin the friends of she that's in the wagon follerin' her captors. But, great Judea! if Idaho Tom or Red Rob war only here with his men, wouldn't it be stavin' old fun for 'em to sail in and lift that quartette of purgatorians? My-eel but that Idaho Tom is a noble youngster, and 'll make his mark yit. But now, s'pose them villains hav'n't been away from their wagon, whose light war that bobbin' round out on the prairie? It war a signal, that's certain, and it war intended for some one out in the night. I reckon that black nigger can't be the mean man and the whites the innocent ones—pshaw! no he's been tellin' too straight a story—he'll do to freeze to on that."

Having thus settled matters in his mind, Dan moved carefully forward. The grass was nearly waist deep, and by crouching down he was enabled to keep himself under the double cover of the grass and darkness; and finally, when within a couple of rods of the wagon, he got down and crept along upon his hands and knees to the rear end of the vehicle, stopping within arm's length of it. He was now compelled to use the most extreme caution, for he knew not when and where he might run against an obstacle. He knew the loss of their horse and linch-pin would put the outlaws on their guard; and he knew not but what the wagon was surrounded by enemies drawn thither by that mysterious signaling of lights. But, when his extreme caution was rewarded by being permitted to reach the wagon without encountering a foe, he breathed freer.

He listened, lying at full length upon the earth, and he could still hear those men forward in conversation. He thought he could distinguish four distinct voices among them, and if so, he knew that none of the party were away, and that he would run no risk of encountering an enemy in the rear of the wagon.

Dan was so low now that he could no longer see into the wagon; but he soon decided upon his course of action: he would rise to his feet and peep in under the edge of the canvas, and learn, if possible, the situation of the captive. If he found her in a situation from which she could not be instantly released, he would creep under the wagon and abide a favorable opportunity. If, however, the wagon-cover was all that composed her prison walls, he would draw her attention to his presence and friendly designs, when one sweep of his knife would open a way from the wagon, and one bound would carry them beyond danger.

His course thus decided upon, the ranger was about to rise to his feet for the purpose of carrying it into execution, when, as the fates would have it, he heard footsteps coming around the wagon.

The old man's first impulse was to turn and flee, but his better judgment prevailing, he dropped himself to the ground and crept under the wagon. Scarcely were his feet out of the way ere the outlow brushed past him, the shuffling of his feet through the grass drowning what little noise Dan made in his movements.

Remaining perfectly motionless, the ranger listened intently. He heard the man walk on around the wagon, then rejoin his companions in a conversation which was carried on in inaudible tones.

The old man was well screened from observation, and would have felt no fears of detection even were the enemy bold enough to avail themselves of the light of a lantern. They had straightened the wagon up by replacing the wheel that ran off back upon its axle, but all the space under the vehicle was filled up with the tall, thick grass through which no human eye could penetrate from without. In the center of this Dakota Dan ensconced himself, having first reached behind and straightened up the grass dragged down in crawling under.

The old ranger had been somewhat defeated in his original designs, but, having now gained a position where he could listen, he resolved to trust to his ears for the information so greatly desired. First he rose to a sitting posture, and pressing his ear against the bottom of the wagon-box, listened long and intently. He felt a slight movement and heard a slight noise above him, but from these he could glean nothing definite. He was satisfied, however, before he went under the wagon, that there was some one in it. His only desire now was to know who it was, and why he, or she, whichever it might be, was there; and so he continued listening. Nearly a minute had passed when he was suddenly startled, with a shudder of inward surprise and terror, by the sound of a low, suppressed breathing. It was not above him, but before him, under the wagon, within two feet of his ears!

A chill passed over him, and for a moment the thoughts of flight were uppermost in his mind, but before he could carry them into action, a man came alongside the wagon and threw open a lantern, whose light burst out upon the night like the glare of a beacon-light. Its rays penetrated Dan's retreat, and even glinted upon the barrel of his revolver. Still he knew he could not be seen from without and at once resolved to remain quietly there, in hopes the light would be removed, actually forgetting, in his excitement, that he had heard some one in the grass before him.

To his disappointment, the outlaw hung the lantern on the step of the vehicle and went away; then, to still add to the excitement of the hour, Dan was suddenly startled by a dull rumbling sound that rolled along the earth like thunder along the sky. For a moment he was puzzled by the sound, but as it grew plainer and plainer, developing into a trembling jar of the earth that seemed caused by the irresistible tread of a thousand hoofs, he came to the conclusion that a herd of buffalo were coming down from the north. But in this he soon found he was mistaken. A wild shout, mingled with an Indian yell that fairly rent the heavens, burst forth upon the night, and the next minute a hundred Indians and prairie pirates drew up around the wagon and were greeted with shouts by the four men belonging to the vehicle.

This placed Dan in a most perilous situation, and through fear of his presence being detected by the lynx-eyed savages, he turned over and stretched himself upon his stomach close along the earth. At this juncture he was forcibly reminded of having heard some one breathing near him under the wagon, when he felt the cold muzzle of a revolver pressed against his cheek, and caught the scintillation of a pair of gleaming orbs set in a white, stony face, from whose lips issued, in a whisper, the startling command:

"Silence or death!"

CHAPTER X.

A DANGEROUS, YET LUDICROUS AFFAIR.

DAKOTA DAN was almost shocked by the new peril that now menaced him. His tongue had become paralyzed and his lips sealed in silence. He could see the outlines of a human face before him, and feel the pressure of the cold steel tube of the revolver against his bloodless cheeks.

There was just light enough struggling through the grass to relieve the space under the wagon of its Egyptian gloom, and enable Dan to distinguish the partial outlines of a beardless face just behind the threatening weapon. He tried to make out to whom the face belonged, but the swaying of the lantern caused the light, shining through the grass, to dance and flicker in checkered bars across the visage of the unknown, so that it was impossible to study his features.

He saw, however, that, like himself, the stranger was lying face downward, and that his elbows were resting upon the ground, while with his left hand he steadied the right, which held the revolver.

Dan glared at the unknown for full a minute, with a look of dumb astonishment; but he was not the man to remain thus, even though death stared him in the face.

In moments of danger, thoughts force themselves upon the mind without any apparent volition of the will, and so it occurred to Dan's perturbed wits, that, if the stranger was an enemy to the Indians and outlaws, he could not be an enemy to him, and that their—Dan's and the stranger's—safety was of a mutual consideration. He thought that the man had perhaps assumed his threatening attitude with the intention of imposing silence upon him, knowing, or at least fearing, that the sudden discovery of his presence under any less threatening position might lead to some inadvertency that would cost both of them their lives. It was precisely what the old borderman would have done himself, had he been in the stranger's place and known that a friend was coming upon him unaware of his presence.

Dan soon recovered his usual composure, though he remained perfectly quiet. He found that he had thrown him-

self into a position similar to that of the stranger—that is, he lay face downward with his elbows resting on the ground, his hands elevated, one clutching his revolver and the other steadying it. By depressing the muzzle of the weapon slightly, it pointed directly into the face of the unknown; and with a nod of the head and a wink of the eye, which seemed to say, "now fire, will you? and I will too!" the old ranger placed his finger upon the trigger of the weapon and compressed his lips in a manner that implied a cool, fearless determination not to yield an inch.

Meanwhile, the wildest demonstrations were being made among the savages and outlaws. Briefly as possible, Prince DeLano, the wagon-master, told his troubles, and at once dispatched a score of mounted red-skins to search the plain for the unknown enemy. The others stood huddled around the wagon like cattle, and now and then one or two would advance and peer in under the canvas at the captive, retiring with ejaculations that denoted admiration.

The noise and confusion were kept up by the outlaws and their red allies much to the relief of Dakota Dan. It enabled him to "face the music" under the wagon without any diversion of attention.

Both he and his unknown companion maintained their defiant, threatening and ludicrous positions with unflinching courage and dogged patience. Neither moved a muscle. The threatening revolvers never varied a hair's breadth from the first position assumed. Dan tried his best to make out the face of his adversary, but the light was too faint and flickering—the grass too high and thick between them.

To a casual observer the scene would have appeared decidedly ridiculous. Who has not seen two thoughtless boys lying upon their stomachs, their heels in the air and their hands together, regarding in silence the continued efforts of a little ant to perform some impossible task?

With this same silent and apparent depth of interest, did the two enemies regard each other, with the muzzle of a revolver within a foot of each face.

How he was to get out of his predicament, Dan could not form the least idea with any assurance of success.

To make a dash for the darkness seemed a very easy way, yet there was danger of such a movement invoking a fatal shot from the man before him, or of foiling all his plans in effecting the release of the captive in the wagon.

Waiting until the red-skins began one of their occasional wrangling noises, the ranger resolved to open a communication with his grim enemy, even at the risk of his life, and in a low, sharp whisper asked:

"Dim it, stranger, who be you?"

"Silence or death!" was the man's reply, fairly hissed.

"Thunder!" returned Dan, regardless of his threat, "you needn't git your back up; they can't hear us."

"Won't you hold your tongue, you old rattlebrain?" and the fellow pushed his revolver closer into Dan's face.

"Be you a tarrapin, a rattlesnake, a hissin' viper, or be you a man or monkey?" and Dan pushed forward his revolver an inch or so.

"I see I'll have to blow your brains out yet," replied the unknown; "can't you keep still? Don't you know, old fool, that it'll be death to be caught skulking under here like two sneaking curs?"

"Git out then, you, and let me skulk alone," said Dan.

"Go to thunder, you!" was the laconic reply.

"Oh, but you need your head pounded!" and Dan shook his revolver under the fellow's nose.

Something like a subdued laugh escaped the man's lips.

A silence among the red-skins and outlaws was followed by a suspension of the war of words between the two men; but the battle of eyes was continued, and lasted until the Indians and outlaws again made a noise sufficient to drown anything they might say. Then Dan said:

"Confound your ornery pieter, who be you? what are you doin' here? and why don't ye git out and let me alone?"

"To all—it's none of your business!" was the cool response.

"Judeal if I war alone you wouldn't talk that way. I'd trounce the impudence outen you, you blasted old ager-chill. Lookey here; don't you know you're in the vicinity of a yearth-quake—a—"

"I see I've got to blow your head off!" interrupted the man, hitching up closer to the old ranger; "now, sir, won't you keep still?"

"Lay down your revolver, and I'll choke it out with you—best man to keep possession of this beaucheful retreat," returned Dan.

To his surprise, the man dropped his revolver, and thrust his hand forward through the grass, and grasping that of the old ranger, said, in a subdued tone:

"Dakota Dan, don't you know me?"

"Oh, Lord!" burst involuntarily from Dan's lips, and loud enough to have been heard a rod away, had the Indians, fortunately for him, not been engaged in a wild, excited conversation at the moment.

The instant the stranger spoke in his natural tone, Dan recognized his voice, as well as his face, for in throwing his hand forward he swept down the thin screen of grass between them. Checking his excited words, Dan continued in a lower tone:

"Does my eyes deceive me—ar'n't I blind? Do I really, trooly, absolutely behold the face of Thomas Taylor, the young dare-devil of the Rocky Mountains? Am I rally face to face, muzzle to muzzle, with Idaho Tom?"

"I rather think you are, my dear old Dan," was the reply, "and I must say that our meeting has been under rather critical circumstances."

"Lord! Lord!" exclaimed Dan, his eyes sparkling like jewels; "give me another wag of your paw, boy!"

And the two friends, Dakota Dan and Idaho Tom, the famous young Outlaw of Silverland, grasped hands in a happy, cordial greeting, almost forgetting, for the time being, that three score of deadly enemies surrounded them.

CHAPTER XI.

DAN GETS INTO TROUBLE AFTER ALL.

"Of all persons on yearth," whispered Dan, moving closer to Tom, and whispering in his ear, "you're the last one I ever expected to run across away over here in this kentry. Why, boy, dim it, I'm just bu'stin' to yell like a volcano—whistle like a locomotive—ay, boy, beller like a buffalo bull."

"I made arrangements to come this way some time ago, Dan," replied Idaho Tom, "and with ten as brave boys as ever mounted a horse, procured an outfit and set out. We had quite a time getting through the Black Hills, for we had the government troops, the white outlaws, and the outlaw Indians to contend with. We've been on your trail some days, Dan, and, although I expected to meet you soon, I never dreamed of such a meeting as this. But how's the Triangle?"

"All shootin', kickin' and scratchin', as usual."

"Glad to hear it; but what are you doing here?"

"Spect I'm on the same business as you be. But, then, it seems to me that we're both in a dasted dreefickilty. Them red-skins are what's sp'ilin' my calculations. I wanted to see what 'em chuckle-headed outlaws have got in this wagon."

"And that's what I am here for," said Tom.

"By the heavens above! I am glad you are here, Thomas. Give us another shake of yer hand, and tell me how you left the folks over in—"

A perfect silence falling on the crowd around the wagon, also enjoined a profound stillness upon the two friends under it.

The lantern still hung upon the step, and by its light Dakota Dan was enabled to study the features of the youth before him. A few years had made quite a material change in the general appearance of Idaho Tom. His features were more clearly defined, but still wore that pleasant, boyish expression. A dark-brown mustache now shaded his fine, expressive mouth, and lent an additional look of manly strength and courage to his features. He was dressed in a neat suit of cloth and buckskin made after the style of the border rangers. Withal, he was a model of perfect manhood that old Dan studied with childish simplicity and admiration. There was something in the kind, generous and fearless nature of the youth that had drawn him the old man's affections, years before. The meeting of father and son could not have been more affectionate, more joyful. Idaho Tom's regards for the old borderman amounted to almost reverence. There was that veneration in his gray hairs, his wrinkled brow and his gentle nature that appealed directly to the better nature and respect of the youth.

"Dan," said the young man, when the Indians again commenced wrangling among themselves, "how long have you been shadowing these fellows?"

"Only since dark. One of their men, a black nigger, deserted them, and I, meetin' with him, got wind of their movements," replied Dan; and then he went on and narrated, as briefly as possible, all he had learned concerning the wagon party.

"There is a captive above, I know," responded Tom; "I have seen so much of these prairie kidnappers and thieves that I can tell by their very movements and outfits what they are up to. But, Dan, I can see nothing that we can do, surrounded as we are."

"No; the fust thing is to git out of this, then—thar! Judeal what's up now?"

The distant report of firearms came echoing through the night.

The two men held their breath and listened, as did their enemies also.

The firing lasted for a few minutes only, then was followed by the yells and shouts of excited voices.

"By the wisdom of Solomon!" our two friends heard DeLano, the wagon-master, exclaim, "the boys have run across them infernal night-hawks, whoever they may be!"

Old Dan nudged Tom, and chuckled softly to himself.

"But, look here," continued DeLano, "they may need help, boys."

No further words were needed to put every savage in motion. In hot haste they mounted their ponies, and in wild confusion strung out across the plain. Soon the four outlaws were alone again by their wagon, and while they were discussing the probable result of the sanguinary conflict out upon the prairie, Dan said to his companion:

"Thomas, now or never. The iron's hot, so let us strike. I'll engage the robbers in conversation, while you get the captive out."

"All right, Dan, but be on your guard," replied Tom.

Dakota Dan placed his revolver in the bosom of his hunting-shirt, and creeping from under the wagon, walked boldly around into the midst of the outlaws.

"Hullo, boys!" he exclaimed, in his usual frank, familiar way; "howdy?"

The four men started as though a torpedo had exploded in their midst, and with an exclamation of surprise, turned upon the intruder.

"Who the furies have we here?" exclaimed Prince DeLano, excitedly, and seizing the lantern, he held it aloft so that its rays would fall upon the face of the intruder.

"You've a forelorn visitor, gentlemen," answered Dan, naively; "I'm Peter Boardner, the great traveler. I'm on a tour around the globe afoot, and as luck 'd have it, I struck you fellows here. I'm wantin' to make British America afore mornin', if possible. How fur d'ye call it?"

Prince DeLano advanced closer to the speaker, and glared down into his face with a look that told his mistrust.

"Old fellow, you are lying to me," the outlaw said.

"I am, am I? well, mebbly you know my bisness better than I do, ole icicle."

"Boys!" exclaimed DeLano, turning to his companions, "do you know old Dakota Dan is back in the territory? This is the man; nail him—salt him on the spot!"

Scarcely were the last words out of his mouth before the old ranger thrust the muzzle of his revolver through the globe of the lantern, shivering it to pieces and putting out the light. Then he attempted to escape, but, quicker than a flash, the hand of DeLano was upon him and held him firm and fast.

"This way, Thomas!" roared old Dan; "this way! I'm in a hill-roarin' deefickilty!"

Idaho Tom hastened to his friend's assistance, and then and there, under the blackness of night, a desperate struggle—a deadly conflict ensued.

CHAPTER XII.

THE PHANTOM PURSUER.

MEANWHILE, Idaho Tom had crept from under the wagon, and while Dakota Dan engaged the outlaws in conversation, brief as it was, he proceeded to gain admittance to the interior of the vehicle. With his knife he cut a long slit in the canvas cover, then parting the selvages, peered in. He was not a little surprised at what he beheld. The interior was lit up with the dim, subdued light of a miner's lamp. He saw that the wagon had been partitioned off into two rooms. The hind one was carpeted, and contained a few articles of clothing, a water-pitcher, a cup, and two persons.

One of the latter was a fat negro wench; and by her side on a couch, lay another person covered with a blanket, but whose face he could not see. He had not a doubt, however, but that it was a woman.

"Kil yi!" exclaimed the negress, as Tom peered in upon them; "what fur you do dat?"

"Keep your tongue, woman, or it may cost you your life," replied Tom.

At sound of the young man's voice the woman on the couch started up; but before Tom could get a glimpse of her face, the terrified negress blew out the lamp.

"Is there not a captive woman here?" the young ranger asked, quickly.

"Oh, save me! save me!" cried the woman within, in a terrified voice.

"Tut, tut, chile! you don't know what you says," the negress put in; "you's out ob your head—your brudder's along wid you, and den dat fellah's a mean scampdrel; I knows he is, honey—wants to 'tice you away from ole aunty."

"If you are in danger, fair stranger, come with me and you shall be saved," said Tom.

The words of the young ranger seemed to inspire the captive with hope and confidence, and she started to her feet and toward the opening.

"See heah!" cried the wench, grasping her by the frock, "you jist set right down, or I'll call Massa DeLano."

"Open your head, and I'll shoot you," replied Idaho Tom, thrusting the cold muzzle of a revolver into her face. The act had the desired effect of intimidation, and the wench sunk trembling and speechless into one corner.

The captive advanced to the opening in the canvas, when Tom took her in his arms and placed her upon the ground.

At this juncture came the sound of Dakota Dan's voice, calling for help.

"Wait here," said the young ranger, addressing the girl, then turning he hastened to Dan's assistance.

The three outlaws threw all their force upon old Dan, and under their combined weight and strength, he went down. But scarcely had he touched the ground ere Tom was upon the scene of action. He seized DeLano by the collar and hurled him with stunning force back against the wagon.

Dan's voice directed his movements, and in an instant he had seized another outlaw and dashed him aside. He dare not use his revolver for fear of injuring his friend. The same applied to their antagonists, leaving the struggle to be determined by main, physical force; but this could be exercised only at great disadvantage, as one was as likely to grapple a friend as a foe in the dark. And how the struggle would have ended, had another combatant not entered the ring, is a question of grave doubt. But, in the midst of the fiercest of the battle, the snarl and growl of a dog were heard, and a moment later a wild, terrified yell of pain rent the night.

Humility had come to his master's assistance.

The outlaws knew not the meaning of their friend's fearful cries, but the moment they heard the growl of the dog, they believed they were set upon by a pack of bloodhounds, and turning, they beat an inglorious retreat. That is, three of them did, the fourth one being held fast in the jaws of the dog.

The negress in the wagon set up hysterical shrieks that pierced sharply through the gloom.

In an instant Dakota Dan was upon his feet calling out:

"Thomas, are you afoot? alive? hurt? Shake him, Humility, the dirty varmint! Lord! what's that screamin' in the wagon, boy?—a painter? a catamount? or a hyena?"

Tom answered his question, then turning, went around the wagon to where he had left the rescued girl. But in a moment he returned with the startling intelligence that the maiden was gone.

"Gone!" exclaimed old Dan; "oh, smoke of Jerusalem! what do you mean?"

"I assisted one, whom I supposed to be a young woman, from the wagon," returned Tom, "and left her by the opposite wheel to await my return. But she is not there; she has either fled with terror, or been spirited away."

"Great Judea!" groaned old Dan; "that's makin' matters wusser and wusser, it is indeed. Poor young thing! May God protect her until we can find her—but mebbly she's hid nigh in the grass—girl! gir-rl!" he shouted, "whar be you?"

But there came no answer—no response save the screams of the negress in the wagon, and the yell of savages on the plain.

"Thar, hear that, boy? it's time to make ourselves seldom in these parts. The purgatorians are comin' back. Mebbly Humility can foller the trail of the gal; come with me, Tom. Here, pup, come away, and let that varmint go now. The devil 'll finish him."

The old ranger moved rapidly away, followed by Idaho Tom and his dog.

Straight toward the point where he had left Snowball he made his way. But, to his surprise, he could not find the darkey where he believed he had left him.

"I'm afraid the varmints has skeered that niggero and the hosses out of the country," he said. "I know it war nigh here that I left him, but dratted if I can see anything of him."

"Can you seen anything at all?" asked Tom.

"Nothin' but blindin' darkness. It absorbs all other colors and objects. But I b'lieve I'll call to the niggero," and so saying, he uttered a low call; but there was no response.

"Dog my boots if he ar'n't gone—he's made a scarcity of hisself, and so's ole Patience, my mare. But she'll not go fur; she knows her business just as nateral as water does its course. You know she's a sagacious critter, Tom? and I tell ye she's lost none of her vim. Oh, murder! you ort to see'd her elevate a red-skin 'over the river,' a few days ago. It's a fact, nothin' war ever found of him but his moccasins. They war right where he stood when she fired at him, and she jist h'isted him right slap dab out of his slippers as easy as fallin' off a log. A monstrous kicker is that mare, Tom; and the older she gits, the sollider she puts 'em in—just kicks fire out of the atmosphere—fact; but, boy, what—what ails you?"

Tom stumbled and fell over something lying across his path.

"Moses!" exclaimed Tom, rising to his feet, "I fell over a human body, be it living or dead!"

"Great Solomon! you don't say! Mebbly it's the niggero, dead or alive; or it may be an Ingin's outfit. Here, Humility, old pup, what is't? Hlist, old dorg, hlist!"

The dog frisked around his master's feet, then set up a mournful howl.

"That tells the tale, Thomas," said the old man, in a tone of positive assurance. "He's dead, be he red, black or white; but I'm afraid it's the niggero."

"I have some matches in my pocket and can ascertain," said Tom.

Then he struck a match, and, shading it with his hands until it blazed up, stepped back and held it down close to the prostrate form. The light flashed and went out, but it enabled the two to obtain a glimpse of the unknown's face.

It was a black face—the face of Snowball. It wore the awful seal of death.

"The red demons have found the niggero," Dan said, with a deep-drawn sigh; "and all's over with him, poor fellow. Thomas, we've got to look after our own hair's safety. If the enemy git us our fate 'll be that of the niggero. As for me, thar's no one to mourn my loss; but if you should be killed, boy, thar's no tellin' what young eyes would grow dim waitin' and watchin' for your comin'."

"Then let us be off, Dan," Tom said; "I might call my men, but for fear danger is closer than they, I will wait awhile."

"Patience, my mare, must be nigh and I must hev her afore I leave. A low whistle 'll be all that's necessary to call her in," and, as he concluded, he gave the call.

Instantly the shrill whinny of a horse was heard a short distance away.

"Thar, did ye hear that familiar voice? It war her'n—Patience, my mare's."

"But what does that mean?" asked Tom.

A strange light suddenly arose from behind a swell in the plain and floated toward them with a wave-like motion. For a moment the two men regarded it with no little wonder and curiosity; but, as it came nearer, its motions became more rapid, and the rangers decided that it must be a lantern carried on horseback. They could hear the swish of feet through the grass, and as they came nearer, and the beams of light thrust their long, skeleton-like selves out through the darkness, Tom said:

"Enemies, Dan."

"Yes, drap aside and don't let the light hit ye, for I'll go a coon-skin that thar's Ingins behind that light."

"Indians seldom carry lights when they hunt an enemy," Tom observed.

"I know it, boy; but them cussed outlaws are at the head of that light business. That linchpin and lost mare will raise the furies in 'em, and they'll leave nothin' undone to slip a knife atwixt our hair and skulls."

They turned aside and moved out of the line of the light. It passed them, now rising and falling, then oscillating like a penulum, with short, quick strokes. It went on past them a few paces and stopped.

"Ding the luck," said Dan, in a whisper, "we've got to git away from here, Tom; and I'm afraid ole Patience has got into 'em purgatorians' hands. I must make another call, anyhow; then I'll be satisfied."

And he did. Then he listened intently for some sound indicative of his mare's approach. He heard nothing, but to his surprise and horror saw that mysterious light turn and move directly toward them.

"Dakota Dan, we've got to keep still," said Tom; "we're hunted by human bloodhounds."

The light approached them, accompanied by the sound of feet. It was not a natural light, for its color seemed to change in and out of red and blue, white and crimson, with every oscillation, casting weird and fantastic figures around. The rangers turned aside as it approached them. Behind it the mystified plainmen beheld some dark, gigantic form, whose extremities were lost in the gloom, stalking onward with long, sweeping strides.

"Gosh a'mighty, Tom, that must be the red eye of doom, or the optic of the Demon of Darkness!" exclaimed Dan, not a little puzzled.

Idaho Tom made no response. He was trying to make out the object moving behind the light, but so effectually was it screened from the rays that only the dimmest outlines could be seen; these, however, seemed of Titan proportions without any tangible form.

"It is not a man behind that light, Dan," he finally remarked; "and what it is I cannot say."

"Tom, run; it's arter us again," exclaimed Dan.

True enough, the light had turned, and again it was coming toward them. They wheeled about and beat a hasty retreat. But they could no longer evade the bearer of the light though they were several rods away.

Turn and dodge as they would in the impenetrable gloom the blazing orb followed them. They broke into a run, and, as they sped along, Dan again called to his mare in hopes that she might hear him and come to his assistance. But in this he was disappointed.

"Tom," the old fellow finally remarked, as he glanced back over his shoulder, "that light is borne by no human hands. No human being could follow our trail as it is doing. We're not visible to mortal eyes. Only the keenest scent could keep our track."

"I don't know, Dan," responded Idaho Tom; "although it puzzles me, I am inclined to believe it some human agency. But, step lively, friend Daniel; it's gaining upon us."

The two hurried on through the gloom endeavoring to elude the pursuing terror. But their exertions were made in vain. It followed them, turning and dodging whichever way they did, and finally it began to gain rapidly upon them. It came so close that they could see each other's face, looking white and ghostly in its glaring light.

Filled with a vague fear, they quickened their pace. They ran on at the top of their speed, while still on in swift pursuit came that fearful Demon of Darkness!

CHAPTER XIII.

WHAT WAS IT?—LIVELY TIMES.

"I CAN'T keep this up to-night, to-morrow and the next day, Tom," said Dakota Dan, as they hurried on over the plain, the old man's breath coming quick and short; "I'm not as nimble as I used to was, Tom; age's tellin' on the old Triangle. My hand's not as steady as a rock, nor my eyes strong as a spy-glass, nor my wind as good as it war, twenty years ago."

"Call your mare again, Dan; if you could only get onto her back, I could get along afoot," said Tom, thoughtfully.

Dan stopped and uttered another call. A horse whinnied not far away, and behind them.

Idaho Tom glanced back and saw that their pursuer was doubling upon them. The light was swaying and glimmering until it dazzled their eyes—blinded them. Deep sounded the tramp of approaching footsteps.

"Drop aside, Dan, drop aside," said Tom, "or we will be caught in the light," and grasping the old man by the arm he drew him hastily aside out of the line of the light.

The next moment the heavy tread of many feet swept past them. A low exclamation burst from Tom's lips.

"Ay! do you not see into it, Dan?" he said.

"Nay, nay, Thomas," replied the old man.

"That light is nothing but a bull's-eye lantern hung to the neck of a horse—the horse is following us, and not less than a dozen savages are following it. And that horse is no other, in my opinion, than—"

"Patience, my mare. Ay, the cunnin' varmints, I see into their little game. They've caught the poor old critter, hung

a light to her foremast, so that it might lead them to her master's side, knowin', by some means or other, that she'd hunt me out of this terrible gloom. It's a trick worthy of better brains, but, my sweet-scented vagabonds, you'll not find old Dan Rackback and Idaho Tom sleepin' like a brace of opium-eaters. Thomas, I feel like myself again, and if them varmints don't look a leetle out, they'll run ag'in' the big eend of a yearthquake. Boy, your hand is steadier than mine; can't you snuff that light with yer revolver?"

"I can try," rejoined Tom, drawing his weapon, "but we will both have to drop ourselves in the grass the instant I fire, for the flash of my revolver will be sure to bring a volley of bullets this way."

Idaho Tom raised his revolver, and, taking as good aim as the darkness would permit, fired. Then they sunk down into the grass, and a moment later a dozen bullets cut through the air where they had stood.

The young ranger's shot at the light proved an unfortunate, as well as successful one. It struck the lantern and shivered it to pieces, but the oil that fed it being highly inflammable, became ignited and flashed up with a broad, brilliant glare. The fire communicated with the tall dry grass, and soon a pyramid of brilliant flames shot up into the gloom of night. The whole surrounding plain became lit up for rods. Patience became frightened and fled away across the plain.

A yell burst from a dozen savage throats and was answered by the sharp crack, crack of our two friends' revolvers. A number of the foe went down ere they could fully ascertain where the enemy lay. But when the survivors had gained this desired information they rushed upon them. Humility darted forward and seized one of them by the throat. The blare of a bugle came out from the darkness. Idaho Tom seized the coiled silver horn at his side and blew a startling blast upon it. Then he and Dan rose to their feet and engaged the savages.

At this juncture a horseman galloped out of the darkness that hung over mountain and plain into the light of the wrecked lantern. The animal he bestrode was a beautiful black, handsomely caparisoned and full of mettle. The rider was small in proportions, and dressed in a sort of black gown to which was attached a hood that covered the head and a veil that resembled a mask. Through the eye-holes of the latter gleamed a pair of dark, shining eyes. Small and finely-shaped feet, incased in blue kid boots, hung in silver stirrups with jingling rowels at the heels. In a small hand, smooth and delicate as a maiden's, was clutched a revolver—a tiny affair that flashed in the light a princely jewel.

Straight toward the combatants rides this strangely-clad horseman.

Within a few paces of them he draws rein; then, with a deliberate coolness, he selects a savage and fires. True to its aim the ball goes home. One after another is selected by this intrepid stranger and brought down by his unerring aim.

Then down from the north sweeps a dozen more horsemen at a wild, breakneck speed. Wild and startling ring their shouts and yells. Sabres and pistols flash above their heads. Onward they come, striking terror to the hearts of the savages and putting them to flight.

A shout of victory went up from old Dan's lips, and he hailed with joy the coming of the unknown friends.

Around the scene of conflict gathered the victors.

"Oh, great Judea!" groaned old Dan, as he gazed around him; "I'm afeard he's dead!" and he pointed toward the motionless form of Idaho Tom lying face downward upon the earth, with the body of a dead savage lying across him.

"Dakota Dan!" burst in accents of surprise from the lips of the horsemen, who, with one or two exceptions, were all boys between the ages of eighteen and twenty. They were the devoted followers of Idaho Tom, excepting the cloaked and masked horseman who first appeared on the scene.

In a moment all had dismounted except the masked stranger; and as each one passed along to where the body of their leader lay he wrung the hand of the old ranger cordially.

"He's dead! I'm afraid Tom is dead!" exclaimed Darcy Cooper, in a tone that expressed his deep sorrow; and his words fell like a thunderbolt upon his friends. They were struck speechless by the terrible announcement, while from the lips of the masked horseman rung a cry of inward distress—a sharp, piercing cry.

"Judea!" exclaimed old Dan, who had been unable to notice but little around him heretofore; "wa'n't that the female woman's scream? I sw'ar it sounded galish!"

Before any one could reply, the strange horseman dismounted, and running to the side of the fallen ranger, stooped, and lifting his head, pillowed it upon his arm and gazed down into his unconscious face.

"He is not dead! he is not dead, I tell you!" he cried, in a wild, joyous tone, that sounded decidedly feminine.

The masked stranger's words broke the spell that bound the spectators speechless and silent.

"By the mercy of Heaven!" cried Darcy Cooper, in an undertone to his companion, "it is she—that good angel, Areel!"

One of the lads took a canteen from the back of a pack-horse, and advancing to the prostrate form of his beloved captain, administered some of its contents to him. The effect seemed magical, for Tom soon showed signs of returning life.

A careful examination of his person revealed the fact that he had only been stunned by a blow, and in a few minutes he was upon his feet again.

By the assistance of Dan and the presence of the dead

around him, he was soon enabled to recall his situation; and when his eyes fell upon the masked face before him, the word "Aree!" burst from his lips.

The stranger replied in a few words, hastily, yet softly spoken, warning him of other dangers.

By this time the light was dying out, there being no wind to fan it. Besides the grass was damp with the heavy mist that hung around and over all.

Idaho Tom was congratulated on his escape by his men, whom he was rejoiced to find around him. He turned and addressed a question to the masked figure at his side.

Before an answer could be given a yell out on the plain smote upon their ears.

"To horse! to horse!" cried old Dan; "the devils are comin' back on us, two-forty strong!"

While the others had been busy in resuscitating Tom, Dan had called up his mare. In the possession of one of the red-skins that had been slain he found his rifle and accouterments, and when upon the back of his mare again he pronounced the Triangle itself once more.

Idaho Tom had left his horse in care of his men when he went to reconnoiter around the outlaws' wagon, and the animal being at hand, he mounted it, and, followed by his men and Dakota Dan, rode away.

Tom invited the masked stranger to accompany them; but with a shake of the head, and an imperative wave of the hand, the unknown turned and galloped away in a different direction.

At a sweeping gallop the rangers moved across the plain, and not until assured that they were beyond immediate danger of the enemy, did they permit their animals to come to a walk.

When they finally did, old Dan exclaimed, with a deep-drawn sigh of relief:

"I sw'ar, Thomas, that that little skrimmage wa'n't so slouchy, war it? Thought a yearthquake butted ye, didn't ye? Bullets flew like dirt—flea thick and tiger strong, didn't they, though?"

"Yes, a little too thick to suit me," responded Tom.

"Not a smidgin' too thick fur me, Thomas," replied Dan; "I like to see a lively fight—I want 'em all around so's I can spin 'em off at about the ratio that a feller would reel off circular oaths arter settin' down on the thorn of a healthy cactus. When man, hoof and howler gits once under way—set in motion, I tell ye thar 'll be somethin' drap. Why, Thomas, the Triangle is a walkin' hurricane, a tornado—a perfect plague to red-skins and sich things in general."

"I know you used to be, Dan; and I don't see that your ardor, strength and courage have diminished one particle."

"You can't notice it, Tom, but time is bringin' us in," said the old man, seriously. "When we undertake to play possum on our enemies, there is more of the nateral trimble in my voice, more of a nateral limp in Patience's walk, and more of a nateral brownkeetal wheeze in Humility's bow-wow factories. Yes, time tells on us, lad. When I left you in Nevada, last spring, you were nearly a year younger than you be now, wa'n't you? You've more of the solidity of manhood about ye now, and that mustache gives you a more manly and resolute look. But, Tom, didn't ye see that gal's face? Didn't you speak to her?"

"I did not see her face; but I spoke to her in an undertone and was answered in the same way."

"I'll bet anything that she war a pufect angel, for outlaws and robbers steal no other kind but gal-angels."

"You are right, friend Dan," responded Tom, "none but the purest, sweetest and loveliest have any charms to those prairie fiends; and, as men and fellow beings, it is our bounden duty to rescue and restore her to her family."

"That's it, Thomas, edzactly. You take to manly principles jist as nateral as water runs down hill. I've seed so much of border life and love, and sich things, that I shouldn't wonder if ye wa'n't in love now with the voice of that gal."

"Tut, tut, Dan, you are inclined to jest," said Tom.

"Captain Tom," said Darcy Cooper, "is in love with a nymph of the Black Hills, Dan."

"Wal, that's a new thing to be in love with, I sw'ar," said Dan, a little doubtful of what he was talking about. "What was it?—a squaw?—red or white?—gal or boy?"

"A beautiful girl, whom we met in the hills—the same who came to us during the fight, a few minutes ago, robed in a black gown, and wearing a hood and mask. She is a robber's daughter."

"Do tell!" exclaimed Dan; "boly pokers! then that gal's in love, too. Queer, awful queer 'bout young folks. Time, howsumever, 'll knock the poetry and romance outen 'em like a mule's heel. Hullo, thar! spur up boys, spur up!"

The sound of many hooved feet on the plain warned them of approaching danger, and putting their horses into a gallop, they moved sharply on until assured they were beyond the reach of enemies, when they halted for the night on the open plain.

Each man attached the end of a lariat to his animal's bit, and then made the other end fast to his saddle, the hollow of which served as a pillow.

Dakota Dan entrusted the safety of the bivouac to the vigilance of his faithful dog, and with the assurance that no danger would approach them unseen, the rangers fell asleep, and slept soundly until morning.

With the first streaks of dawn the band was in the saddle and in motion. Feeling greatly invigorated by rest and sleep, they galloped sharply along in the light of the rosy morn.

Around them lay the open plain interspersed with little

mottes of timber and brushwood, diversified by creeks and rivers, and tossed into an endless continuity of ocean-like waves.

The party moved on until the red sky, all aquiver with the beams of the god of day, burst into flame, when the rangers stopped in a little clump of timber to breakfast on the remnants of their last meal.

Before sitting down, however, Dakota Dan, as was his usual custom, concluded to reconnoiter the surrounding vicinity; and with his dog set off toward the margin of the grove.

He had been gone but a few minutes when the spiteful crack of a rifle rung out on the morning air, and the next moment, Humility came flying back to camp in wildest terror.

With blanched faces, the young rangers started to their feet, gazing from one to the other with looks that spoke plainer than words.

"Come, boys!" exclaimed Idaho Tom, "Dan's in trouble!" and the little band of heroes bounded away like deer, after their gallant leader.

CHAPTER XIV.

A RETROSPECTION.

IN order that we may introduce other important characters to our readers without confusion, it becomes necessary that we now go back a few days beyond the time of the last events recorded and narrate the events, incidents and adventures of Idaho Tom and his gallant band of boy-rangers that transpired during their passages through the Black Hills.

With no other outward motive than that begot of the spirit and love of adventure, had Captain Taylor, or as he was better known, Idaho Tom, and his band crossed the mountain and penetrated the Black Hill country. They knew at the time that it was forbidden ground—in other words, the reservation of the Sioux Indians; but, fully acquainted with the habits of the savages, their forbearance and the extent to which violations of the government treaties were usually carried, the rangers resolved to do nothing that would bring them into antagonisms with the red-skins. Before they reached the hills, however, news of the discovery of gold came to their ears; and as a number of them were experienced miners, they modified their original intention of passing straight through the hills, and concluded to spend a month or so prospecting for gold. Procuring a number of pack animals and a mining outfit they struck out for the most unfrequented parts of the Black Hills. They went into camp in the valley of a little stream tributary to the Powder River. There was plenty of grass here for their animals, game in the vicinity that would furnish them with food, and good prospects for mining.

Although they were far from the Indian stronghold, and in a very rough and desolate part of the hills, they found one or two well beaten trails, bearing the imprint of hooved feet, running southward toward the Indian village. All attempts on the part of the rangers to trace these paths to some starting point failed, for all they were very desirous of knowing who their neighbors were, if there were any at all in the neighborhood.

For several days they continued to ramble on foot among the hills, and finally becoming satisfied that they were alone, began prospecting for gold.

Dividing up into three parties, they scattered out in different directions through the hills, returning to camp at evening to report the success of the day's work.

On the evening of the third day, as Idaho Tom, Darcy Cooper and Sam Walton were returning to camp, their attention was drawn aside by sight of a light blue smoke curling up from among the hills and tree-tops some distance to their right. They had never noticed it there before, and so their curiosity became aroused. Idaho Tom gave his tools to Walton and Cooper, and sending them on to camp, he struck out across the country to make some inquiry regarding the smoke. His way lay over a series of rough, broken hills, deep-wooded valleys and yawning chasms and pitfalls. And as it was nearly night, the young miner was compelled to pick his way with extreme caution.

In the course of an hour he arrived in the immediate vicinity of the smoke, which he could still see lazily curling into the air above the tree-tops. That it rose from a camp-fire in the valley he had not a doubt; and so he began to pick his way down the almost perpendicular face of the cliff overhanging the vale.

Arrived safely below, what was his surprise to find no signs of a fire there. He glanced up and down the valley but could see nothing; and so he became somewhat puzzled. The valley was only about four rods wide, and guarded on each side by high bluffs, from whose face sharp ledges of rock were thrust out, here and there, above and below, the tree-tops. Huge pines, with heavy tops, shot heavenward from the valley in whose soil centuries had rooted them. Their tops were so interlaced that not a patch of sky could be seen through the dense canopy. From the projecting ledges one could have walked out upon the tree-tops.

A sort of foreboding silence pervaded the place.

A subdued light enabled Tom to discern the surrounding objects indistinctly.

He glanced carefully around upon all sides. He searched

the bluffs towering above him with a keen eye; but as he could neither hear nor see any signs of life, he turned his face toward camp in no little disappointment.

The shadows of evening had long since begun to gather in this narrow mountain defile, and as night was close at hand, Tom saw the necessity of hurrying along, and so moved away as rapidly as possible.

Suddenly a full score of mounted men swept around a bend in the valley into plain view.

Tom stopped and started back in surprise and fear. His first thoughts, when he saw they were white men, was, that they were a band of prairie freebooters, and he was about to seek safety in flight, when, upon a second glance, he discovered that the horsemen were a party of United States troops, the foremost of whom wore the uniform of a major of cavalry.

Idaho Tom stood his ground without the least fear, and as the horsemen drew up before him, he saluted them by touching his hat.

"Well, whom have we found here?" demanded the major, eying Tom from head to foot as though he were some contemptible creature scarcely worthy of inspection.

"My name, sir," replied Tom, politely, "is Thomas Taylor."

"And what are you doing here, Thomas Taylor?" the officer asked, his tone tinged with sarcasm.

"Having a bit of sport," responded Tom, with a confused smile.

"Do you know, sir, that you have no business here on this reservation—that you are trespassing?" asked the major, with a martial air, and a display of self-arrogance.

"I'm doing nothing objectionable to the Indians."

"Sir, that is not the question—the idea at all. Orders have been issued, sir, to arrest every man found within the limits of this reservation and march him off, especially if he has no business here. And, sir, by the authority vested in me, I shall be under the necessity of escorting you to the headquarters of General Custer."

"Indeed!" replied Tom, somewhat puzzled over his dilemma; "this is something I had hardly expected; and if you will allow me to go on, I will promise to quit these hills with all possible speed."

"I can and will do no such a thing, sir. My duty is imperative; moreover, I have no assurance you would keep your word."

"What do you take me for, major?" Tom asked, a slight flush mounting to his handsome face that appealed directly to the soldier's admiration.

Stung to the quick by Tom's reply, the major retorted.

"Sir, I take you for an insolent puppy; and I desire you to understand that no further impertinence will be tolerated," and turning to two of his men, ordered them to take Tom into custody and march him along in rear of the command.

As there was no alternative but to obey, Tom was taken in charge by the two cavalymen, when the party moved on slowly up the pass.

Tom did not become disheartened, for he had high hopes of effecting a compromise with the commandant. At least, he resolved to make the attempt before he ever hinted one word of having friends near. But in case he could arrange no terms of compromise, he would be compelled to tell the whole facts connected with his party being there. His principal object in this was to prevent a collision between his followers and the soldiers, which he knew would be the result, should they discover him a prisoner in the soldiers' camp. He knew the reckless daring of his men and that they would no more hesitate in attacking a party of soldiers than a band of savages. The soldiers were in the majority, he knew; but his boys had been trained in the school of the mountaineer, and being well armed with repeating rifles, a desperate conflict was sure to be the result of a collision.

Tom learned from his escort that the party was a detachment of General Guster's command, then encamped some distance north. While rumors of the finding of gold in the hills had reached his ears, Tom never knew, until now, that an exploring party under direction of the government was in the country, else he would have been more careful. As it was, however, he resolved to make the best of a bad situation.

His captors moved on but a short distance up the valley and went into camp for the night; which fact gave him no little relief. But when the major ordered him bound and secured to a tree, his emotions assumed a bitter and indignant character; but, curbing them the best he could, he submitted, with apparent grace, to his fate, however humiliating it might be.

Guards were posted above and below the camp. A fire was kindled in the center of the defile, and soon its glow lit up the surrounding darkness.

The soldiers made their supper off cold rations; then heaping armloads of fuel on the fire, they sat down around it to recount the day's journey and adventure. Thus they spent an hour or two; finally they began to drop off, one by one, to rest. The earth was a bed, the hollow of their saddles a pillow, and their blankets and the dense canopy of pine boughs their only covering.

The commandant, and one or two scientific gentlemen, were finally the only ones that remained up. They seated themselves together and engaged in examining a map, making notes of the day's explorations, and selecting a route for the morrow.

Meanwhile, Idaho Tom had been given a blanket, and his

bonds lengthened so that he could lie down at pleasure. He wrapped the blanket around his shoulders, and seating himself upon the ground, leaned against the tree to which he was bound. Closing his eyes, he engaged in mental reflection. He had made no attempt to secure his release. He resolved to wait until the major was not only at leisure, but alone. He concluded that if there were no one to witness the man's authority and imperious dignity, he might engage him in a friendly conversation, and thereby effect some terms of conciliation. While waiting for this opportunity, he fell into a gentle doze, from which he awoke with a sudden start. His eyes were turned upward, and in the dim glow of the subdued light an apparition unfolded itself to his view—an apparition that bound him speechless with horror to the spot.

It was the form of a woman—a young and lovely girl robed in white, standing indistinctly outlined in the dusky shadows above. She stood in mid-air with no visible means of support; and with a white finger, upon which flashed a hoop of gold, pressed upon her lips, floated upward into the overhanging shadows of night.

Tom had obtained but a mere glimpse of this mysterious form, and his mind had received such a sudden shock by sight of it, that for a minute he believed he was still dreaming as he had been before he awoke. Again and again he reassured himself that it was but the vagaries of an excited mind. But in spite of his efforts to the contrary, the truth would force itself upon him, and at length that strange feeling which a mystery engenders, took possession of his mind.

When the commandant arose and started to his tent, the young ranger was so confused that he let slip the opportunity for which he had been waiting so long, to speak to the officer. Then followed the uncomfortable assurance of being alone, in one sense of the word, with the mystery of the apparition weighing upon both body and mind.

Finally a corporal of the guard went out with reliefs, and the others came in, replenished the fire, dried the dampness that had accumulated on their clothing from the heavy mist, then wrapped themselves in their blankets and lay down to rest.

Again all were soon asleep, and Tom alone kept his wakeful watch over the camp-fire. As the moments wore away, however, his thoughts grew sluggish and his mind confused. The monotonous roar and crackle of the fire; the labored respirations of the tired and worn soldiers now fast asleep; the tinkle of the ringbits of the animals tethered near; the ghostly flicker of the quivering, dancing light; the ogreish forms and faces that an excited brain conjures up in the writhing, twisting flames—all conspired to draw the veil of unconsciousness over him, and fill his breast with a vague foreboding. He tried to fight off the powerful influence of sleep. The struggle was a hard one. Body and brain courted its advance, but the will rebelled. The contest lasted for nearly an hour, and it seemed as though the former would gain the victory. Heavy weights seemed pressing down upon his eyelids and his brain throbbed. Tom would have given anything in the world for an hour's sleep; but under the circumstances he felt as though it would be death to give up then.

Determined to fight the seductive power to the last, he rose to his feet and began pacing to and fro the length of his bonds.

The fire burned lower and lower. Only the sickly glare of the red coals now lit up the surrounding view. The rocky bluffs on either side of the pass frowned down upon him grim and threatening. The stately pines, with mossy trunks, rose upward like slender gray columns to support the mighty dome of night. Up and down the valley the darkness stretched away into infinity.

A sound like that of a human voice suddenly reached Tom's ears.

He mechanically raises his eyes. He starts back with a low exclamation, for out of the blackness of heaven he sees again that angelic apparition descending to earth. Still robed in white is it—still upon the lips is pressed a snowy finger!

"Is it an angel?" Tom asked himself.

He could see that she was young—not over eighteen. Her form was graceful and sylph-like, and clothed in a plain, spotless robe of white, over which fell a wealth of black, silken hair. Her face seemed as white as the robe she wore in the dim twilight. It possessed a wild, imperious look. Dark eyes, radiant with celestial love, looked from out her white face upon the prisoner, filling his soul with a strange, speechless silence.

Mute as a statue of surprise, Idaho Tom stands watching the lovely vision descending to earth. In the fingers of one hand he sees a small, glittering knife resembling the blade of a stiletto, but it gives him no fear.

Down and down, slowly, and without any apparent volition whatever, she descended upon the air until finally she touched the earth. Then with a quick glance around her that seemed more human-like, she advanced to the side of Idaho Tom and deliberately cut his bonds.

"Flee, sir," she then said, a look of benignity beaming on her wondrous face, "flee—up the steep bluff there. Go, for my sake, and may the Holy Mother guide and protect you."

Then, to his surprise, she cut the sign of the cross upon his breast with her finger, and upon his back, also.

This done, she advanced to the spot where she first touched earth, and, kissing the tips of her little fingers to Tom, rose aloft in the air—up out of sight in the blackness of night.

Starting, as if from a terrible nightmare, Idaho Tom glanced wildly around him, then turning, glided out of the camp—up the hillside and away into freedom.

And still the soldiers slept on.

CHAPTER XV.

"LOOK OUT!"

SLOWLY through the lonely hills Idaho Tom made his way.

The branches of the pine above him swayed in the night-breeze; a wolf howled in the distance.

All was dark and dismal as eternity, and the young miner could make his way onward only at the risk of breaking his neck. He had been schooled in the mountains, however, and there were no dangers possessed by the deep canons, the rugged bluffs and treacherous ground, but what he was familiar with.

Now and then, as he moved along, he picked up a small stone and tossed it ahead of him, and by the sound it produced he was enabled to judge of what was before him. If it rolled back at his feet he knew an acclivity was before him, but when it went clipping away, the sound growing fainter and fainter, it told that a yawning chasm disputed his advance.

Tom shaped his course in the direction that he supposed would lead him to his camp; and with no other thought than that he would ultimately reach it, he moved on, dreaming of the beautiful apparition that had come from the clouds to his release. Many were his speculations regarding her, the place of her abode, and the power she possessed. In fact he dwelt upon the matter so long, to the exclusion of other thoughts, that it suddenly occurred to him he had lost his course among the hills and valleys.

A dense mist obscured the sky and blotted out the moon and stars, and so there was nothing visible by which he might set himself aright; there was but a single course open to him—by sound. Of this he resolved to avail himself, and at once placed his thumb and forefinger inside of his lips and blew a sharp, piercing whistle that cut through the air in far-off echoes. He repeated it a number of times, then in answer finally came the prolonged twang of a horn. He recognized it as his own by its peculiar tone, and with a lighter heart he bent his footsteps in the direction of the response. Ever and anon he repeated his whistle and clear and distinct answered the horn.

Some distance before him the dim reflection of a light was seen, and as the hills and hollows over which he was now passing had assumed an air of familiarity he felt assured that the light shone from his own camp.

He hurried on and soon came within view of the fire itself, and his heart gave a bound of joy and delight when he recognized a number of the familiar forms and faces of his own followers standing around it. He quickened his footsteps almost to a run, and when about two hundred yards from camp a voice demanded:

"Who goes there? You, Tom?"

"Ay, Darcy Cooper," responded the young miner, advancing toward his friend; "but what are you doing here?"

"Hunting you, Tom; where have you been?"

"Having a bit of lively adventure," was the reply. "A party of soldiers under one Major Braklace are encamped over here in the pass; and, as they happened to meet me, the gallant major found it his duty to take me into custody, and halter me up to a tree, as you would a festive mule with a frisky heel, and left me there to brood over my situation. But, Darcy, what do you think? I, Tom Taylor, like John the Baptist, saw an angel descend from out the darkness in a robe of white and a halo of mist. A look of mercy was upon her lovely face, and what should that celestial creature do but approach me, cut my bonds and bid me go—and for her sake."

"You are romancing now, Thomas," replied Darcy.

"I will swear by the sun, moon and stars to what I say; and, what is more, the angel must have been one of the good disciples of Loyola, for, after invoking the protection of the Holy Mother, she not only made the sign of the cross on my breast, but upon my back, also," and as Tom concluded he laughed merrily over the whole strange affair.

"By heavens!" exclaimed young Cooper, having obtained a glimpse of Tom's back, "I believe you now, Tom; and that her touch must have been one of fire, for there is a blazing cross this holy minute on your back!"

"What's that?" exclaimed Tom.

"There is a glowing cross of fire on your back," repeated Darcy; "pugh! it smells like brimstone or phosphorus—it is a cross made of phosphureted ether. Tom, are you sure you are not mistaken as to the nature and nationality of your angel? Are you sure she came down? I tell you, boy, you smell of the Inferno. I'm afraid you, Tom Taylor, unlike John the Baptist, are mistaken in your angel."

Tom took off his hunting-jacket, and, true enough, found a glowing cross upon the back of it.

"By the royal society!" he exclaimed, "that girl, whoever or whatever she may be, has been practicing some deception on me—confound her pretty, angelic picture!"

Darcy Cooper could not restrain an outburst of laughter at his young friend's annoyance and surprise. He saw that Tom had been in solemn earnest about his lovely visitor from the realms above.

"I shouldn't wonder, Tom," he finally said, "if you heard from her soon again."

"Yes; I daresay this was put here in order to guide her, or her friends, to our retreat; and, as it was done secretly, it could have been done with no good intention, I am afraid."

"Plague take such angels, Tom; they're a nuisance to the country."

"I tell you, Darcy, that girl's appearance was attended with no little mystery. She was dressed in a loose, white robe, and *did* descend from the darkness above, without a single movement of the hand or body. She actually seemed to float down upon the air by no other power than the volition of her own will. Of course, if she was mortal, as I am now strongly inclined to think she is, her descent and ascent were made by some material, yet invisible, means."

"Most assuredly, Tom—but there goes your horn at camp. The boys are very uneasy about you, and for fear the continued blasts may bring those soldiers down upon us we had better hurry in."

They moved on and entered camp, where Tom's arrival was hailed with shouts of joy.

"Where have you been, captain? where have you been?" were the questions that passed from lip to lip.

"Tom's been out among the angels," said Darcy Cooper, a smile of mischief lighting up his face, "and one of them streaked him with brimstone."

In explanation of Darcy's assertion, Tom was compelled to enter into a detailed account of his absence, concluding by taking them into the darkness and showing the cross upon his back.

After the subject had been discussed, all agreed that the cross must have been made there for some purpose or other, that could be of no good to them; and, through fear of danger, one of the party suggested that they change the position of the camp immediately. Before the others could pass an opinion on the matter, the tramp of feet was heard, and the next moment the darkness gave birth to a dozen or more grim forms—the forms of men who stalked boldly into camp with a revolver in each hand, and confronted the young miners.

CHAPTER XVI.

KIT BANDY.

OUR young friends were, for a moment, rendered breathless with sudden fear by the bold and warlike intrusion of the strangers. There were thirteen of them—all rough and bearded men, dressed in a garb that gave them a fierce, brigandish look. That they were mountain banditti, the young miners had not a single doubt, and that they had been guided there by the blazing cross on Tom's back was also self-evident.

Tom's feelings toward the beautiful creature who had liberated him in the soldiers' camp, now became anything but adoration. He was satisfied that she had been instrumental in getting him out of the frying-pan into the fire. Beautiful in face and form, and clothed in the spotless robe of innocence and purity, had she come to him, so like an angel from high, with all that was lovely and gentle in a noble woman, appealing to his manhood and inspiring his inmost soul with a feeling of divine admiration—all for one purpose—to betray his faith, and seek his and his companions' lives.

That the outlaws meant violence was evident from the insolent and insulting boldness in which they entered camp; and our young friends quickly exchanged glances full of a world of meaning.

While the latter did not invite trouble and danger, they were always ready to give them a hearty reception—ripe to battle with the enemies of the law and their peace. They had all been reared in the midst of the most exciting scenes of a mining country, where Judge Lynch and the revolver presided over the peace of the district. But all of them possessed more or less mental culture. Ignorance and superstition had nothing to do with Idaho Tom's band of boy miners. The life and character of Idaho Tom himself, being familiar to the reader, it is needless to say that one or two years had detracted nothing from his courage, his noble, manly character and kindness of heart.

True to his previous vows, Tom had quit the gambling-table and a life fast leading to dissipation; but he could not give up his love of adventure and manly sports.

Each of his followers he had selected for his moral worth, his unflinching courage, his reckless daring, and his knowledge of mining and mountain life. He had seen each and all of them tried on different occasions, and knew what he could depend upon. He had armed and equipped the whole band from his own resources—still being a stockholder in one of the best paying silver-lodes in Nevada. He had provided each one with a repeating-rifle and side arms of the most approved pattern. Every man and boy was an unerring shot with either rifle or pistol, and a knowledge of this fact gave the party assurance of their ability to cope with the robbers, although the odds, by two men, were in favor of the latter.

"Good-evening, young cavaliers," said the leader of the band, in a tone in keeping with his sinister looks.

"Good evening," responded Tom, in mock politeness and apparent surprise; "your presence, gentlemen, is quite a surprise to us."

"No doubt of it; but, in the meantime, *your* presence is an insult to us," was the villain's bold reply.

"Indeed, my gallant knight?" replied Tom, no longer concealing his contempt; "what, then, is the most humble wish of your gracious lordship?"

"Young man," the outlaw fairly hissed, advancing closer to Tom, with a menacing frown, "you must not insult me with your impertinence; I will not brook it."

"We, sir," responded Tom, fearlessly, and with a look that fairly made the outlaw wince, "are a band of independent rangers, or miners, as the case may be, and we exercise as much liberty of speech and as many privileges as is consistent with our pleasure. You have blustered into our camp with the bravado of a bully, and an air of authority, but all this belies your real courage."

"Hal hal!" laughed the man, savagely; "you are devilish handy with your tongue, but if I mistake not, *you* authority was disputed awhile ago by a troop of cavalry over in the pass."

"And I doubt not but that I am indebted to you for my release, and—"

"Also, the cross on your back, by which we were guided to your camp," added the outlaw, with a malicious smile.

"Were it not for your villainous countenance, I would think your motive in liberating me was a good one."

"The whole thing simmered down amounts to this: you are required and notified to leave these hills between this hour and sunrise," said the outlaw.

"Show your authority for this notice?" demanded Tom.

"There it is!" the villain hissed, and with glaring eyes and set teeth, threw his revolver out at Tom's face, in a menacing manner.

"And there!" responded Idaho Tom, throwing up his revolver, "is what nullifies the effect of your notice."

"Is it fight?—or run?" asked the outlaw.

"As you please, sir; as for our part, we'd rather fight."

"Fire, men!" cried the outlaw, with a furious oath, and scarcely had he given the command ere thirteen revolvers were leveled at our friends; thirteen hammers fell, and thirteen caps exploded; but not a single discharge followed.

"Fire, boys!" shouted Idaho Tom, and then the simultaneous crash of the young miners' weapons rung forth upon the night.

An oath burst from the outlaw's lips as he saw a number of his men fall around him. But again and again did he and his surviving companions cock their revolvers and raise them, and again and again—until every chamber had been tried—did the caps explode without a discharge.

Rendered furious by these repeated disappointments, and with eyes blazing like those of a demon, the chief made a lunge at Tom, and attempted to brain him with his revolver used as a club. But, with a movement that seemed to require but little exertion, the young miner averted the blow and at the same time dealt the villain a lick upon the head that sent him to earth, more than a rod away. His companions saw him fall, and believing he had been slain, turned and fled into the woods and darkness, leaving their dead and wounded behind.

Tom allowed his burly foe to rise to his feet, bleeding and wounded. The wretch fairly trembled with rage and fury, but the flight of his living companions, and the presence of the dead and dying, told him how greatly he had been deceived in his power, and that he was at the mercy of his enemies. Despite this fact, however, he cursed them with impotent rage, and even continued his threats.

"Leave here, you miserable wretch!" said Idaho Tom.

"You may feel thankful that you are thus permitted to live, for I could have slain you had I been disposed to waste powder and lead!"

"I go," he said, flashing back the look of a demon, "but it is to come again!"

The villain turned and walked away in the gloom.

"Boys," said Idaho Tom, when he was out of sight, "we have all been saved by the intervention of Providence."

"Without a doubt," answered young Walton, devoutly.

"The cap on every robber's revolver exploded," continued Tom, "without any further effect; and the villains never came here as they did, knowing their weapons were empty, for they are cowardly, murderous wretches. Some one, knowing their intentions, had drawn the charges; and, boys, who knows but it was she who released me in the soldiers' camp?"

"No one but a lovely woman in a robbers' camp would dare attempt such a thing," said young Cooper.

"If my escape from the soldiers' camp, and our escape here, are owing to that girl's intervention, she is still an angel to us."

The groans of a dying outlaw called the attention of the miners to him. Out of the kindness of his great heart, Idaho Tom knelt by the man's side and did everything within his power to alleviate his suffering, for all he saw that it was no use. The youth knew no enemy in the dying man, and with a pardoning grace he administered to his wants as death shook his great stout frame with its icy breath.

"It's no use, boys," the outlaw said, looking gratefully up into Tom's face; "let me die quick, for die I will. We didn't want Van Pruss to provoke a fight; but he is as rash and reckless as he is cowardly. Then some one had tampered with our revolvers. We entrusted them, as is usual on such occasions, to Kit Bandy, to load with powder and ball. If he deceived us, he has paid the penalty, for he lays there dead. He was a good, jolly, brave old man. But, boys, leave here at once. Captain Prairie Paul will soon be in, and then he will hunt you to the death."

"Then you are of Prairie Paul's band?"

"Yes," he answered, gasping for breath, while his fingers picked feebly at the selvages of his blouse.

"And who was that beautiful girl that liberated me in the soldiers' camp?"

"Oh, God have mercy!" he exclaimed, in a strong, peni-

tent voice, his eyes staring wildly open, and his arms outstretched as if to embrace some imaginary being. Then followed a relaxation of the muscles. The arms fell limp at the side; the jaws fell apart, the eyes, half closed, became fixed; a convulsive shudder ran through his body, and at length he rattled in the throat—he was dead.

The rangers turned away from the dead, when Tom said:

"Boys, let us take the advice of the dying man and at once leave these quarters. Between the soldiers and the pirates of the gold hills, we will have a little more than we can attend to. If it would be in order, however, I would like to march over into the pass and lick the conceit out of that major and his party before leaving here. I owe him a drubbing for his abuse. However, I am content to leave here under the flush of one bloodless victory, and strike eastward for the plains of Dakota, and spend a season among the buffalo; then drop southward to the Niobrara, and go into winter quarters, or else go down to the Union Pacific railroad and take passage for home and the Rocky Mountains."

Tom's followers assented to his proposition. They were content to follow him wherever he might lead, and the matter of at once breaking camp being thus settled, preparations for departure were made.

The horses were brought up and saddled, a stock of provision and their general outfit were loaded upon their pack animals, and in a very short time all were in readiness to move.

"Boys," said Idaho Tom, glancing back at the four dead outlaws, as he was about to place his foot in the stirrup, "it will never do for us to leave those bodies unburied, for already the wolves are jibbering near. We claim to be Christians, but it will not be Christian-like to leave those bodies there. Let us go to work and hollow out a grave for each."

Taking their spades from the packs, they went to work, and in a few minutes had hollowed out four rude, shallow graves.

Then Tom and Davy McBell lifted the body of one of the outlaws, a tall, slender fellow, who lay upon his face right where he had fallen, and lowered him into the grave. Unfortunately the grave was too short for the body, and the idea of cramping the limbs down into it was being vigorously executed, when to their horror and amazement the corpse rose to a sitting posture in the grave, and, with an air of dissatisfaction, said:

"Confound you illiterate, bunglin' gump-heads! don't ye see this 'ere hole's no fit for me? don't you want to give a man a decent burial? are ye a pack of dinged heathens that ye want to chuck a dead feller into sich an insignificant hole as this? dug without any regard to mechanical precision, the head lower'n the feet, and a infernal hump under the back. Rasp my darnated picters! I'm not goin' to lay in any sich a trough. If old Kit Bandy can't have any better accommodations than that, why, he's not goin' to make any real estate pre-emptions yit awhile," and the speaker deliberately rose to his feet, shook himself like a spaniel, and, stepping out of his grave, thrust his hands into his pockets and burst into a fit of rollicking laughter.

The young miners were completely astounded by this sudden change in the situation, and for quite a minute were rendered speechless by it. But the truth forcing itself upon them, they saw that the man, Kit Bandy, was unhurt, and had, for some purpose or other, feigned death until the last moment.

He was a tall, lean, gangling sort of an individual, with a long arm and a huge bony fist, a rough face and prominent features. A round head was set upon a long, scrawny, hairy neck, and covered with a kind of brigandish-looking hat that was a few sizes too large, and jammed down upon his ears, making those members branch abruptly outward in a manner that gave him an odd and comical appearance. His mouth was an enormous gash, capable of fearful contortions, and which, in addition to his gray eyes and Roman nose, made up the most ludicrous and comical specimen of the genus man that our friends had ever met.

The spirit of innocent devilment lurked on every feature of the man's face, and in his awkward, ungainly movements there was hidden a prodigious strength and the agility of a panther.

After our friends had taken in the situation, Tom exclaimed:

"What does this mean, anyhow?"

"I'd ask that," said the man, stretching out his long arm, and turning his head with affected disdain—"I'd ask that; yes, I would. Why, sir, it means that I, Christopher C. Bandy, arn't goin' to be chugged down in a hole like that with my limbs all cramped up in any sich a heathenish way. If I can't have room under ground, rasp my darnated picters if I don't have it on top a while yit. I only measure six feet six, and as I won't crowd onto any one above, or interfere with any one's arrangements, I calculate to sniff the upper current of air a few years longer. No, I arn't as dead as some folks think I be. I arn't even scratched or hurt!" he exclaimed, with a quick roll of the tongue, that produced a sound like the croak of a frog. "No, I feel as though I could laminate a grizzly b'ar, or chew up a painter."

"Well, what are we to understand by your strange conduct?" asked Idaho Tom.

"Understand, did ye say? Why, sir, in the fust place, understand that I arn't goin' to be doubled an' lapped up in that hole; next place, that I arn't dead; next, that I'm goin' to measure territory for the States, seein' as what I've had my satisfaction minin' in these diggin's. The society out here don't soot me; the social part is all hunk but the morals are

bad—bad," and he shook his head disdainfully, at the same time gnawing fiercely at a plug of villainous tobacco, keeping one eye closed.

"What are you doing here?"

"Minin', of course; but unfortunately I fell in with these dasted pirates. I've been watchin' a chance to skedaddled this long time, but never met it afore to-night. P'raps you seed, if ye noticed closely, that I kem dasted nigh fallin' a leetle too quick when you fellers fired. I tell ye I got right down briskly, for I knowed there wer'n't a bullet in our weepens. But I'd no more'n vacated a certain spot ere a chunk of lead went a-rippin' through it just about heart high."

"Then you must have removed the charges from the out-laws' weapons," said Tom, becoming deeply interested in the odd old Kit Bandy.

"Didn't I, though?" said the old fellow, with a sly wink. "But now, boys, as a friend let me warn you to be getting out of this vicinity, for it's onhealthy. And if you'll find me a boss and saddle, and a waiter, and all that a fust-class gentleman of my longitude might require, I'll see you out o' this; and I'll tell you more secrets—dark and dismal secrets—as we amble away, than are on the records of his Satanic majesty."

To this the young miners all agreed, and rigging out one of their pack animals, placed Kit Bandy astride of it; then, mounting their own horses, they turned down the valley, and rode away into the gloom of night.

CHAPTER XVII.

LIFE AND ADVENTURES OF KIT BANDY.

THE little party rode on in silence for more than an hour, when they finally emerged into a wider and more open valley. Here the way was less difficult to follow, and they moved on at a sharp pace. When assured that they were beyond immediate danger, Kit Bandy's tongue began to move more glibly, and he talked away on different subjects with the familiarity of an old acquaintance. He appeared to feel no more compunction over his late calling and associations than if he had been engaged in the most honorable avocation among law-abiding men. He even assumed to direct the movements of the young miners, much to their surprise and amusement.

They soon found that he was one of those harem-scarem old nomads whose reckless disregard of consequences, and public and private opinion, made him at home, whether in robber camp or Christian tent. And wherever he happened to be, there was a power in his good-natured, comical face, and his extravagant, humorous speech, that kept down distrust of evil motives.

"I would like to know, Kit," Tom finally said, "how you ever happened to be among the robbers."

"Well, sir, the straight of the story, if we run it back to the place of beginnin'," he said, ejecting a volley of tobacco-juice forward over his horse's head, "dates Jiniuary the tenth, Anny Dominy eighteen hundred an' fifteen. Old aunt Peggy Bandy, as the folks called her, was originator of the hull affair, and a leetle, long-legged baby war heard to sound its bugle one mornin' of the aforesaid year, in the Bandy cabin; and from that day on little Kit had an existence. After a few years' dandlin' around on all the old weemin's laps in Oak Holler, and huggin', and squeezin', and kissin' among the little folks, I bloomed out into a real likely tow-headed boy. Then I started to school—that place of fun and frolic. After passin' through a few years' ear-pullin', jig-dancin' and fly-killin' at school, I made a bulge and come out a young man with a sprinklin' of luck among the female gender, and a light set of whiskers. Time passed on and I got my full sett; then I began to cast about me for some trade or perfession. Fust I tried stage-drivin', but that didn't gee; so I next tried shoemaking, but I couldn't l'arn to drive a peg to save my sole. So next I started a grocery down at the Cross Roads, but as whisky war the only thing in demand in that 'ristocratic district, I coukdn't stand it; so I give away what flour I had on hand, drunk up my stock of whisky at cost, and took to the ministry. This kem the nighest of any of them bein' the shoe that fit. But, I couldn't stand the pressure of four revivals a year—too much kissin' and huggin'. I wouldn't 'a' minded it so much if the work 'd been done by them as you like; but, if thar war an ugly old tarmagrant of a woman in the congregation, she was surer than thunder to monopolize the best kissin' and huggin' position in the room, right whar it war onpossible to do justice by the handsome young sistern. So I got disgusted, shook off my ministerial robes and measured the distance atween Oak Holler and the Pacific Ocean. Here for some twenty or thirty years I've been practicing fust one thing and then another. I've trapped and hunted 'long every creek and river west of the Missouri. I Fortynined some in California, and thar I passed through two years of an experiment I never want to repeat. I married—yes, actly married Sabina Ellen Frisby, and arter a spell of conjugal hair-pullin' and head-poundin', we quit. Sabe war a good woman at heart, when the devil war absent from it, but rile her up and she pushed a fist right out from her shoulder like a mule's heel. More'n once she flipped my trotters from under me, did Sabe. But the big joke of all war when we lived down in Hellaboloo Gulch. One night Sabina came home from Hoover's Station purty well on her ear. She

would tipple a little, would Sabe. Weemin weren't so awful nice and perticler them days as now. A woman that wouldn't hobber-nobble glasses 'em days war considered a tender, wuthless thing, sure to be shunned by the men as a spell of small-pox or cholera. But the fust thing Sabina did war to fetch me one, fair atween the eyes, thar, laid me kerwhop on the floor. Then she haired me, and arter almost wringin' my head off, she accused me of bein' false to her—of paying respects to Angeline Crustover; but the Lord knows, I never drunk a dozen bumpers with Ange in my life, and told her so; but you might as well 'a' talked to a wild-cat. So we had it up and down like a perfect catamount fight. Meantime it war rainin'—yes, stormin' like all fury without. It 'd been rainin' all day up the mountain, and I war awful on-easy for fear of a freshet, and while we war skirmishin' my wust fears war realized. All at once an awful torrent come a-boomin' and a-rolin down the valley. Siam, it took our cabin, bu'st open the door, and in rushed the water and punched us up ag'inst the wall like forty-seven mule heels. The house shook like old Sabina's form, and I see'd we'd got to git out o' thar or drown. The water was continually risin' in the house; wave after wave chased each other in at the door and out at the winder. A huge log suddenly glided right through the house, and was follered by a panther, half-drowned. I stood it long as I could, then I bounced up the ladder into the loft, and up come the old woman after me, still a-jawin' and fussin'—puttin' in a lick whenever close enough. She had no fears of the storm or torrent, she was so dinged mad, and, rasp my eyes if I know which I war the most afeard of—Sabe or the torrent—better bear a leetle to the left, boys, and we'll soon strike the Powder valley," the old man said, dropping his story to direct the movements of the party.

The young miners followed his directions, inasmuch as it was their previous intention to take the course, and then he resumed his story.

"Well, the water soon got up into the loft, and then I peeled off some shingles and clim'd outside onto the roof. Out come Sabe after me, a-jawin' away. It was nip and tuck atwixt her tongue and the bang of the thunder, and rush and roar of the water, to which the continual blaze of the lightning added somethin' of awful consideration. The water kept a-creepin' higher and higher until the roof of the cabin began to sway and totter. I see'd it couldn't stand much longer, and so I made a leap for a tree near and landed among its branches. Then I beseeched my darlin' to foller, but she just up and snorts out with a tragic air: 'Never! never! base wretch!—never will I seek safety on the same tree with you—no, never, NEVER!'

"She knowed durned well she couldn't jump to the tree, and so did I; and that's why I asked her. But the next minute the roof floated off with Sabina upon it, and as she went a-scuddin' down the valley, I groaned out and bid her farewell.

"Bless God for the torrent," was the awful critter's reply; 'it will be a divorce to me. You'll soon be drowned out of that tree, while I'll float down to the flats and call out some one to my rescue,' and away she went, hollerin' lack fur as I could hear, settin' bolt upright on the roof with her hair a-flyin' and a-whippin' in the wind. The thunder tossed and tumbled overhead; the wind whistled and screamed like a hundred Sabinas; the lightning licked the sky with a thousand forked, quiverin' tongues of fire, and the torrent roared awfully. But fur as I could see, Sabina was herself, and shakin' her fist back at me—now and then takin' turns with the storm-winds in tryin' to laugh like a maniac. But, finally she disappeared, a speck in the distance. Wai, to make the story shorter; I wer'n't drowned, as the sweet-scented Sabina had hoped, for the water went down, and so did I. But thar wer'n't a corner-stun of the Bandys' palacial residence left; and so in order to leave the impression that we were both drowned, for I knew Sabe would be, I made myself seldom in Hellaboloo Gulch, and after five years knockin' about, drew up in Austin, Nevada. Thar I figgered lively fer a spell; chawed up a few Ingins; knocked the stuffin' out of a few Chinamen, and otherwise regulated things in that immoral, corrupt place. The next criminal act I did war to fall in love again."

"Again?" exclaimed Idado Tom, "after your former experience in love matters?"

"Yes, again, durned ole fool that I war. But I could not help it. Hagar Ann Forgot just froze right to me, and what else could I do? Then to acknowledge the fact, she resembled my lost Sabina, more or less. She war better-lookin', though, than Sabe ever war; and much handsomer. She had coal-black hair—Sabe had red—fair complexion and some accomplishments. She war far more refined than old Sabe, and never got drunk, nor swore even if she did lose a hand at poker. But to shorten up again, we war married one day, and just as I war about to plant the weddin' kiss on her lips, what should she do but draw back with clenched fists and glarin' eyes, that revived thoughts of my lost darlin' and exclaim: 'Nary kiss, you dasted, ornary old hypocrite! nary kiss, Kit Bandy! I've worked, and plotted, and planned, and dyed my hair, and powdered my complexion these years to bring about this, you old blind fool. Ha! ha! if ye did 'scape the torrent, you won't 'scape the vengeance of a wronged, deserted wife—no, you won't, you old—' but, boys, I didn't stay there to hear any more, but I did escape the vengeance of that woman—that very old Sabina, the deceivin' critter. Great horn of Joshua! how fine she played Hagar Ann Forgot. But I pulled up and left Austin and went over to Virginny city,

whar I became another man—settled down, war elected justice of peace, and called Squire Bandy. Finally I left there, and the tide of old time tossed me up here 'mong Prairie Paul's band, whar I've been doin' some huntin', some minin', and—"

"Some stealing," added Darcy Cooper.

"As there's a heaven, I never stole a thing from an honest man in my life; nor has Prairie Paul been doin' much thiev'in' since I've been with him—more minin' than anything else."

"What is your opinion of the gold prospect in the Black Hills, Kit?" Tom asked.

"Haydoogins of gold thar to be had for the diggin'. Paul and the men have panned out several dollars a day to the man. They'll make a big thing of it yit if the sojers don't find 'em out and h'ist 'em. I tell ye they war mighty oneasy 'bout you fellers: they war afraid you'd strike a lead, communicate the fact outside, and then bring in others. It war all I could do to help Aree to save your lives."

"Who's Aree?" questioned Tom.

"Why, the angel that descended in the fine wire basket and liberated you in the sojer's camp, that's who. She's the pet of the band, and—"

"Well, now, Kit," Tom said, "you are coming to the point. Let us hear something about that girl."

"She's a beauty, capt'in—a reglar beauty, and, great horn of Joshua! what a temper she's got when you rile her up! As I war goin' to observe, she's the pet of the band, and if any man insults her in the least, she just deliberately shoots him down, and the rest cry, 'so be it.' Thar's five weemin among the band, but none of them can shine up to Aree, the Princess. She's the darter of the lieutenant of the band, Ivan Van Pruss; and would you believe it, capt'in? that girl loves you like all tarnation. I'd die to have her love me the way she does you," and the old man burst into a peal of beauty, rollicking laughter that set the young miners into a roar.

"Was she sent to release me to-night?" Tom asked.

"Yes; her father wanted to know whar your camp was, so he ordered her to dress up like an angel and go down in the invisible wire elevator and cut your bonds while the sojers slept. Then she war to invoke the blessing of some saint, and make the sign of the cross on your breast and back. The last was to be made with phosphorus, arranged handily on the haft of her knife, so's its shine would guide us to your camp. She didn't want to do it, but when her father told her he would shoot you dead whar you sat confined unless she did, why, she consented to go down. I also promised her that I'd see that you got off safe, and so down she went, the brave, fearless angel, in the wire elevator, which is worked by a pulley on the ledge above."

"Exactly," replied Tom, with an air of satisfaction; "that ledge you speak of is concealed among tree-tops, and leads into a cavern."

"Precisely; and a magnificent place it is, capt'in."

"A thin wreath of smoke rising in that vicinity is what drew me up there, and got me into trouble."

"Indeedy? Well, you may thank your stars that you got away—Harkee! harkee!"

All turned their heads and listened. The clatter of hoofs, coming down the valley, fell upon their ears.

"Danger, boys! haydoogins of it, by the horn that shook old Jericho's wall!" exclaimed Kit Bandy, and his long legs began warping his horse violently: "ride up, ride up like the wind!"

And putting spurs, the little band galloped sharply onward.

CHAPTER XVIII.

BETWEEN TWO FIRES.

For more than two hours our young friends could hear pursuing feet behind them, but the sound finally began to grow fainter and fainter, and at length died away altogether.

By midnight many miles separated them from their hastily-deserted camp in the hills, and pushing on they finally debouched into the open valley of the Powder River.

It was their great desire to cross the river soon as practicable, and Idaho Tom so expressed himself to Kit Bandy.

"Wal, my dear sir," said the *ci-devant* robber, "thar's but one ford this side of Ingin Butte, and that's thirty miles from here."

"Isn't there a point nearer where we might effect a crossing?"

"No; it'd be impossible to cross this side of the reg'lar ford, and if ye say cross thar, why, cross it is."

"I think we had better cross there, for by so doing we can get off the reservation sooner, and then we'll not be between two fires—the United States troops and the prairie pirates."

With the matter thus understood by all, they moved on, Kit Bandy assuming the lead with as much indifference as though entire confidence had been reposed in him from the moment they met. In fact, he never questioned the miners' feelings toward himself, but took it for granted that he had been accepted into fellowship with them, and acted accordingly.

Owing to the rough and uncertain condition of the country, the party would be compelled to travel some forty miles to reach the ford; and, knowing full well that their animals would need rest before the distance was made, they halted

about daylight, unsaddled their horses and tied them out to feed upon the dry grass and green shrubbery.

Kit Bandy killed a fawn near where they halted, and, dressing it, a fire was lighted and most of it roasted. What was left after a hearty breakfast was reserved for future need.

After a couple hours' halt the miners resumed their flight. They moved on as fast as possible, stopping about an hour only during the day.

Night found them still a few miles from the ford. They halted, however, in a thicket of dense brushwood to rest and feed their animals before approaching the river.

While there, a horseman suddenly swept past them like the wind, going south.

The ranger-miners started to their feet.

The clatter of the flying hoofs died away in the distance.

"Horn of Joshua! he's in a bit of a hurry, now, ar'n't he?" observed Kit Bandy, facetiously. "That reminds me of the days of the Pony Express. You heard a clatter; you see'd a black something shoot across your vision, and—durned if the rider wa'n't gone. All that war left to convince you that some one passed was the tracks in the road, and the dust, puffed from the animal's heels, hangin' along the trail."

"But there is no Pony Express line hereaways," said Tom, uneasily.

"Nary one, capt'in; and as to the meanin' of that dash past us jist now I can't say. Thar's a robber relay somewhar down this way, and it may have been a messenger from headquarters. Or, it may have been a military-dispatch bearer goin' to Fort Sully. Mebby the blue-coats have got into trouble with the pirates of the hills, and need help. At any rate, we'd better git across the ford as soon as is consistent with our leisure. If Prairie Paul should ketch me in you fellers' society he'd work up a pizen dose for my physical system. When I git across the river I'll feel more like an American eagle, and then, boys, I'll talk some to you—of freedom and liberty. I never felt so mean and so ornery in my life as since I've been a part and passel of Prairie Paul's band—yes, I did once, too, come to think! That war when I lived with Sabina. I tell ye, boys, the devil hisself couldn't beat that old female woman. She'd head a feller at his own game, if she had to steal a trump out of his hand. Once when I put a burr under old Fluke's tail, and the horse run away with her, and threw her into a mud-puddle, she swore vengeance on me. I watched her for nearly a year, and s'posed she'd forgotten all 'bout the burr; and so one day, tired and weary, I spread a blanket under the inviting shade of an azelea, that grew on the green, grassy bank of the Yuba river, and laid down upon it to rest. I fell asleep and slept sounder than a dead man. I don't know how long I slept, but suddenly I felt myself go kersouze into the river. I awoke right away under the impression that I'd got to tossin' about in my sleep and rolled off the bank. I begun to struggle, but I found that I war helpless. My hands were confined at my side, my head and face war kivered, and my feet and legs tangled in somethin', and I couldn't tell, to save me, what in plaguation ailed me. I kicked, and floundered, and struggled, and hollered, and every time I'd sink under water I'd feel somethin' jerk at my head and fetch me nighly onto my feet. Finally, I heerd a sharp, fiendish laugh, and then the hull truth bu't on my mind like a rotten egg. That ornery old Sabina had sewed the blanket up around me while I slept, and then rolled me into the Yuba. Then, with a rope attached to the top of the bag, she amused herself for forty hours, I act'ly believe, dousin' me up and down in that water, laffin' and yoopin', and tauntin' like a fiendish below."

"Now then, you ole vagrant of the Yuba! she'd yell, 'you'll put another burr under my hoss' tail, won't you? Will ye beg? will ye say enough? will ye promise obedience?—to love, cherish and protect?' and a lot more of sich, and if I didn't answer right up, down I'd sink, for she'd sewed a big stone in the bag at my feet. Arter I war nearly drowned she'd yank me to the surface and put them questions again. And, boys, it's a bloody, murderous fact, I act'ly had to promise everything afore that old demoness would haul me out and rip up that bag. I'd assassinated her on the spot if I hadn't been so dimmed weak that I couldn't raise one of them mauls," and he shoved his huge fists out into space, and swore furiously over the recollections of the affair.

The young miners indulged in an outburst of laughter; then, mounting their animals, continued on toward the ford.

The way to the river now lay through a defile not over forty rods in width, and, as they approached the ford, the faint glow of a number of moving lights arrested their attention and further advance. But the moment they stopped the lights disappeared.

"Horn of Joshua!" exclaimed Kit, "them war the marble lights of the robbers, shurer'n thunder! They war across the river, too, on t'other side of the ford."

"What do you mean by 'marble lights'?" asked Tom.

"Why, they're little hollow glass balls, 'bout the size of a marble, with a hole through 'em for a string. They're filled inside with phosphorus in its most luminous form, and are used in the night that one rob may know another; and are—Hark!"

The sound of flying hoofs smote upon their ears, coming down the defile toward the ford.

Before they could decide upon any course of action, a horseman drew rein in their midst.

It was dark, but from force of habit, the rangers, as we will continue to call the little band since they had been compelled to give up their prospecting as miners, had become somewhat accustomed to the dense shadows of night; and

they were enabled to see that the stranger was a woman. She was dressed in a suit of dark water-proof, while a hat with a white plume surmounted her head.

She was mounted upon a black pony, whose smoking flanks, foam-covered sides and red, steaming nostrils told that it had been long and hard ridden.

"Is this the party of young men that was encamped in the hills recently?" she asked, the instant she drew rein in their midst.

"By the ram's horn that shook old Jericho's wall!" exclaimed old Kit, "that's the voice of Aree, the Princess."

"Yes, it is," she responded, "and I recognize your voice, Kit, which in a measure answers my question."

"I am the person, my dear Miss Aree," said Idaho Tom, politely, "whom you liberated in the soldiers' camp."

She rode nearer to Tom and looked into his face, her own fair visage flushed with excitement and her exhilarating ride, while her eyes beamed with the radiance of love.

"You are in danger, sir," she said, touching his arm with her gloved hand.

"Indeed? but you have surely not ridden fifty miles to warn us, have you?"

"I have," she answered.

"Then again have you placed us under obligations to you, for which we can never repay you, for thus risking life and limb," was Tom's response.

"It is a pleasure to be of some benefit in this world," she answered, softly. "Kit Bandy, there, has no doubt told you who and what I am. But, sir, you are in danger. My friends, through an Indian, put the soldiers under General Custer upon your trail, and they must now be within the pass. Meanwhile, Prairie Paul, with ten men in Indian disguises, is waiting for you on the other side of the ford, and they will try to hold you till the soldiers come up, when they will take to the hills to escape the soldiers themselves. Since night before last messengers have been flying through the hills, and every effort possible made to avenge the death of those who fell in your camp. But an hour or two ago, a messenger passed me on his way to Couble's ranche after reinforcements for Prairie Paul. Of course, they will be expected ahead of you and the troops, but—"

"Boys, I'm afraid we're between two deadly fires still!" said Idaho Tom.

"Yas, by the horn of Joshua! we're in a wuss fix than I war when I clum' a holler redwood arter a young b'ar once, and old Sabina built a smudge under me, and smoked me and the b'ar both to death."

"You cannot go back, for the soldiers hunt you as outlaws, while death in ambush waits you on the other side of the river," said Aree; "and so there is but one course open to you."

"And that?" said Tom, eagerly.

"Is to go boldly across the ford. In the night my friends wear that by which they may distinguish a friend from a foe. It is by wearing a tiny ball of fire attached to a button-hole where it can be seen. I have fifteen of these under my cloak, and each of you can take one, and, by means of the string upon it, suspend it to your breast; and then ride across the river, and when you gain the opposite shore put spur and seek the shelter of the woods. The mountaineers"—as she called her friends—"will not dare fire upon you with these lights. They will think they are worn by the friends sent for. Here—there is no time—not a moment to be lost," and she gave one of the glowing balls, wrapped in thin paper, to each of the little band. While thus engaged, Kit Bandy asked:

"Are they doin' much mournin' over my death up at the ranche, Aree?"

"They were puzzled over the absence of your body and the empty grave," she answered.

In a moment Tom said:

"We are now ready to follow your instructions, fair friend, be it to freedom or death."

"May God speed you!" she answered, with a depth of earnestness in her trembling voice.

"But you, Aree—"

"Never mind me," she interrupted, "a hundred times have I ridden over these hills where you would not dare to go. But, sir, may I ask your name?" and her voice fell almost to a whisper.

"Thomas Taylor," the young man answered.

"Thank you," and she dashed away. The next moment her pony was heard clambering up the steep mountain side to their right, where the ascent seemed to loom abruptly into the sky. At every bound almost they could see a flash beneath the iron-shod hoofs of her pony, and up and up, higher and higher were those faint flashes seen to rise—diminishing in the distance like the dull glow of a receding firefly.

"Gracious heavens!" cried Tom, almost motionless with fear; "she will be killed! She is mad—wild!"

"Don't worry 'bout that gal, Tom," said old Kit. "Her life's charmed by all the fairies in Christendom. She'd be reckless enough to ride up Bunker Hill monument if she'd take a notion to."

"Brave, beautiful and peerless Aree!" said Tom.

The sound of approaching horsemen at this juncture, warned the little band of danger, and turning their animals' heads, they rode on toward the ford.

CHAPTER XIX.

CROSSING THE RUBICON.

UNDER the gloom of night, the river flowed silently on.

To and fro across the defile before them, in and out of the shadows like weavers' shuttles, glided the velvet-footed coyote and hare.

The sky was overcast, and a dense fog hung over the river and the approach to the ford.

Twelve glowing specks of fire blazed upon the throbbing breasts of our twelve friends, as they advanced toward the river.

Not a sound escaped their lips; only the tread of their animals' feet told of their approach, aside from the lights.

Half a score of eager eyes, concealed among the bushes on the opposite side of the river, saw the moving lights and kindled brighter with delight.

Into the flowing, treacherous river rode the rangers, and through it they spur their plunging beasts.

The Rubicon is passed, and they stand upon its shore; and now, as if actuated by a single impulse, they dash away and escape into the woods.

Under the spreading branches of a great tree, Idaho Tom finally halts to call the roll and enumerate the loss and casualties.

All answered to his name save one.

Kit Bandy, the ex-robber, was missing!

They waited for him, and called; but he came not.

No one remembered having seen him since they entered the river.

"Boys," said Darcy Cooper, "I am afraid he has gone back on us," and he expressed the opinion of all but one.

And that one was Tom, and Tom alone was right. Kit Bandy had not deserted them, but was unknowingly deserted—left behind in trouble.

In crossing the river, he had permitted the current to bear him too far down the stream, and his horse became entangled in some drift-wood and mired down in the treacherous quicksand bottom. In the darkness, and the confusion consequent upon the crossing, his companions failed to discover his mishap.

Down, deeper and deeper sunk his horse in the sand. Its exertions to free itself only served to increase its peril. Kit soon discovered his danger and leaped from the animal's back into the water, tearing off the signal-light on his breast as he did so; for at this juncture the rangers dashed away, and the robbers in waiting discovered the trick that had been practiced upon them.

Throwing himself upon his back, he floated down the river at the will of the current, the floundering of his horse drawing the attention of the enemy to the one spot, and thereby enabling him to make good his escape.

Seeing that they had been outwitted by the rangers, the robbers made no attempt to pursue them, nor did they create any noise that would attract the attention of the approaching soldiers; but at once stole softly, yet briskly away down the river to where they had left their horses.

Meanwhile, the redoubtable Kit Bandy was floating silently down the river, and there is no telling when he would have gone ashore, so easily was he drifting along, had he not discovered that the banks of the river were fast developing into the walls of a canyon. This decided his course, and he at once turned and swam to the east shore, scrambled up its almost perpendicular bank and sat down upon a rock to regain his breath. While thus engaged, he took off his clothing, piece by piece, wrung the water out of the garments, and replaced them upon his person. This done, he rose to depart.

"Dast 'em, I got away from 'em, if I did have to swim for it," he said aloud, a habit he had of talking to himself when alone.

The next moment the tread of feet was heard, and a dozen men confronted him. They were Prairie Paul and party—the very men of whom he was speaking.

"Kit Bandy! is it possible that you are here alive?" exclaimed the outlaw chief, in astonishment.

"Ar'n't it, though, capt'in?" responded Kit, endeavoring to speak with his usual composure, while his heart was sinking through fear that his desertion of the band had been discovered. But his quick wits serving him at the proper instant, he continued, without scarcely an interruption in his speech: "and a devil of a time I've had of it. Them ornery, mean young scape-gallowses took me in a prisoner, and with all my figgerin' and fightin', I couldn't slip 'em till we went to ford the river. My boss mired and I floated off—s'posed thar war a lot of sojers nigh, or I'd 'a' put to shore sooner."

"But how is it that the rangers all carried our signals?" asked the robber captain.

"Horn of Joshua! that's nothin', capt'in. They know more'n half of our secrets—got 'em from some of our traitors. Them boys have got haydoogins of 'em signal balls among their effects. I tell ye, friends, 'em boys are regler young Bengal tigers on a fight."

"Kit, how does it come that you are here alive?" asked one who had seen him fall in the rangers' camp.

"That's easy 'nuff counted for. Old aunt Peggy Bandy fust started me in business, secin' she was my mother. But if you want to know *why* I'm alive since the t'other night, I'll say that it comes from the fact I weren't killed. I war only stunned, and when they got so wonderful Christianish as to want to chuck me into a grave that wa'n't fit for a dead Piute, I had to let 'em know I wa'n't ripe for plantin' yit, and

so they snatched me in a prisoner—a curiosity of the Black Hills for a Chechago menagary, they said. Didn't ye see my grave? wa'n't it a slovenly affair?"

"Yes, and were surprised to find it empty," said Paul.

"Humph!" grunted Kit, disdainfully, "a dead man wouldn't sleep in such a dasted hole as that war. But, oh, horn that blew down old Jericho!—if them fellers ar'n't cases, I don't want a cent. They're afeard of nothin' human, and shoot!—why, hounds of Satan! shoot's no name for it. I've see'd 'em shoot gnats off each other's cheeks with their revolvers; and that's not all. They never use a ramrod to load a muzzle-loadin' rifle."

"You're tryin' to sell some one, as usual, now," remarked one of the outlaws.

"Gospelfactorum; the way they do it, they put in the powder, then the owner of the gun steps off a hundred yards, and another with a breech-loader of the same bore shoots the ball down the barrel of the muzzle-loader—do it every time slick as a ribbon—fact, gospelfactorum."

"What an infernal lie," said one of the robbers.

"Have it your own way, boys; but I would like to get out of this place into a dryer suit of clothes, else be movin' to generate some heat to dry these 'uns."

"I would like to find out before leaving here," said Prairie Paul, "the position and movements of the soldiers. We have more to fear of them now than the rangers."

"Then s'pose I scout up to'rds the ford?" said Kit.

"Go ahead, and hurry back," replied Paul, and Kit departed, one of the party having provided him with a rifle and revolver.

The outlaws never suspected him of falsehood, nor dreamed of his real intentions. The empty grave, and the words they had heard him speak when he first landed, were ample proof of what he subsequently told them. Kit saw how easily he had disarmed them of all grounds for suspicion; and with a reckless disregard of his word and the probable consequence, he turned aside as soon as he was out of hearing, and crept around to where the robbers had left their horses hitched in the timber. Selecting the finest one, which of course was Prairie Paul's, he vaulted into the saddle, waved a silent adieu toward the robbers, and rode away, convulsed with silent laughter over the conceit of his deceptive trick.

Meanwhile, Idaho Tom and party were riding rapidly away. They kept on the move all night, and the next day they passed out of the hills, upon the open plains of Dakota. Here they felt more at ease, and had the fate of Kit Bandy been known to them, they would have had no uneasiness whatever hanging over their minds, for, somehow or other, they had become attached to the whimsical old ex-robber.

Toward the close of the day, they espied a white-topped wagon across the plain some distance to their right. There was something about this "prairie schooner," and its movement, that gave it a piratical look, and the young rangers resolved to inquire into it.

Concealing themselves behind a swell in the plain, they waited until night, when they moved cautiously toward the wagon. The vehicle had stopped; and leaving his horse in care of his friends, Idaho Tom crept softly through the tall grass, and, unseen, gained a position directly under the wagon, where, a few minutes later, he was confronted by Dakota Dan, the ranger.

CHAPTER XX.

DAKOTA DAN IN TROUBLE.

WHAT followed the meeting of Dakota Dan and Idaho Tom, under the prairie pirates' wagon and elsewhere, has been fully recorded up to the time we left them encamped in the little grove on the prairie, and at which point we resume the main thread of our story.

It will doubtless be remembered that Dakota Dan had left his friends to reconnoiter the immediate vicinity, and had gone but a few minutes when the angry report of a gun started the young rangers with the belief that Dan was in trouble. The sudden appearance of Humility in camp, howling with agony, went far to corroborate this belief, and they at once set off to the old ranger's assistance.

After leaving the rangers, Dakota Dan had proceeded but a short distance when he was suddenly brought to a stand by sight of a dark line crossing his path at right angles. No one but an experienced hunter would have noticed this, for it was but a faint trail of something through the grass. Dan examined the ground carefully, and discovered the imprint of a moccasined foot in the yielding soil. Glancing along the trail, he was not a little surprised to see a red-skin with his rifle at a trail, skulking through the timber as though he, too, was reconnoitering the situation.

Dan turned and set off to follow him, in a crouching position. Humility took the lead, and as they moved along, an accident befell the old man, that in all his experience as a hunter and ranger, never happened before. The hammer of his rifle caught on a twig and the gun was discharged. The muzzle being forward and pointed directly toward Humility, the bullet grazed the animal's side and clipped off the tip of his right ear.

Startled by this rough usage, such as he had never received of his master before, the dog turned and fled, yelping at every bound.

The Indian was brought to an abrupt halt by the report of the gun, and turning, he ran his eyes over the woods behind him. He could see nothing; however, his savage curiosity was aroused, and he started back along his trail to make some investigations.

Dakota Dan saw his movements, and at once stepped aside into a cluster of bushes to await his approach. A smile of grim satisfaction and determination mounted the face of the old man, as he watched the savage creeping nearer and nearer with every faculty on the alert.

"I'm goin' to give him a tussel," Dan mused, with a decisive nod of the head; "I've found but few red-skins in my time that could handle me; but I'm growin' old, and I want to see whether my physical powers are failin', as I've thought they war of late."

The old man breathed heavily as he made this mental concession. He glanced back over the past and at a life that had been so busy; then as he glanced at his form, that had been so admired for robust health, physical strength and wonderful celerity, and compared it with the past, a vague horror crept over him like a chill. He realized that youth and all its energies were gone, and that an old man's grave was not far on in the gathering gloom. Yet he dreaded to acknowledge the same to himself, and as a kind of self-assurance that he had a long lien upon life, he secretly resolved to test the matter by engaging the savage in a hand-to-hand encounter. The idea seemed to amuse him, for a smile overspread his face. He winked at the unsuspecting warrior, then pushed up his sleeves, spat upon his hands, and was ready for the conflict.

The Indian moved along, growing less cautious as he advanced. He seemed under the impression that his presence was unknown to him who had fired the shot.

He carried a rifle, a tomahawk and a knife; and in size and physical development was Dan's superior. These facts became more apparent as the warrior approached, and the old ranger finally grew doubtful of his ability to cope with the red enemy. Before he had much time, however, to ponder over the matter, the red-skin was passing him; and, acting upon the impulse of the moment, he sprung out from his covert and seized the foe around the waist from behind.

"Avaunt, purgatorian! succumb!" he yelled at the top of his lungs; "yer in the grasp of a tornado!"

The red-skin dropped his rifle, while his form seemed to expand with inward power and fear. He made a lunge forward, and, like a monstrous eel, slipped from the old man's grasp. He plunged forward, however, with such momentum, that he was pitched full length upon the earth, and partially stunned.

With a leap like that of a panther Dan landed upon his back, and drawing the red-skin's knife, threw it aside. The savage soon recovered from his shock, then began a hand-to-hand struggle in which all the strength and skill of the foes were called into play. Dan had no desire to slay the savage out of a natural thirst for Indian blood, but he wanted to vanquish him for reasons already mentioned. He had the advantage of the Indian from the start, and he knew it stood him in hand to hold it till the last, for he soon found that the warrior was a powerful man.

The fight began in the small undergrowth near the edge of the thicket, and as the ground, from this point, sloped gradually toward the plain, the forms of the two foes naturally obeyed the laws of gravitation and in the struggle rolled out into the open ground. A few rods from the edge of the *motte* there was a long, narrow depression in the earth, known in the parlance of the West as a "buffalo-wallow." This was filled with water, but a casual observer would never have known that such was the case unless he had stumbled into it. As there was no outlet the water was still. Aquatic plants had grown up in it, and spread their "dog-ear" leaves over the surface. Then the autumn winds had whirled the dry leaves from the grove and distributed them over the pool more than a foot deep. Thus the plants supported by the water, and the leaves by the plants, formed a layer, or covering, deceptive in its character. And right toward this hidden pool Dan and his antagonist rolled.

The old ranger knew nothing of its existence; the Indian may have known it, for his inclinations seemed to tend in that direction, with a view of drowning the terrible enemy that clung like a panther to his back.

Guided by the noise among the undergrowth, the rangers hurried toward the scene of conflict. They were satisfied, by the actions of Humility, the report of the gun, the half-suppressed yell they heard, that there were Indians about, and so moved with caution as well as dispatch.

They soon gained a point from where they were enabled to see their old friend in deadly combat with the savage. They were then struggling upon the very edge of the "buffalo-wallow," which the rangers mistrusted was full of water the moment they saw the depression; and knowing the danger that would likely be added to Dan's already perilous situation, should they roll into the water, Tom and his friends were about to dash out to his rescue when they saw the tall grass on the opposite side of the pond slightly agitated, then a score of rifles, along which gleamed blazing, savage eyes, appeared in sight out of the grass. The weapons were pointed directly toward the rangers, who, seeing their danger, dodged back under the cover of the thicket and threw themselves flat upon the earth. Then unslinging their rifles they prepared for battle, for this seemed inevitable now.

"I'm afraid our old friend has got himself into trouble!" exclaimed Captain Tom. "That grass over yonder is full of Ingins, who will cover their friend engaged with Dan. At

the same time, however, we can do likewise by the old ranger. So, boys, look out for a target and make every shot count one when you get a chance."

The rangers kept a sharp watch upon the opposite side of the pond, as well as upon the two struggling foes.

Suddenly a cry burst involuntarily from their lips.

Dakota Dan and his adversary had rolled into the pond, locked in each other's deadly embrace.

A yell burst from the savage's lips, and was answered by his friends on the opposite shore.

Dan uttered a yell of defiance, and was answered by a prolonged shout of encouragement from his young friends.

The savages poured a volley of shot across the pond into the thicket where the rangers lay. But they fired too high, while the smoke from their own guns told the whites where to direct their aim; and as their rifles rung out, the tufted heads of three or four savages were seen to pop up at different points, while yells of agony told how fatal had been the rangers' volley.

Several volleys were now exchanged in rapid succession, and while our friends escaped unharmed, they had no way or means by which to judge the loss of the enemy.

Considerable agitation, however, was manifested on both sides of the water. The muzzles of the red-skins' rifles were seen moving hither and thither, up and down above the giant grass; while our friends crept hastily to and fro along the margin of the thicket in order to keep the combatants in the water in view. The latter were now changing position so rapidly that it was almost impossible to keep track of them and watch the savages on the opposite shore.

At times Dan and his antagonist were both under the water and leaves, then upon their feet with their heads just visible. Leaves and water flew in a perfect shower around them. The Indian's long hair was drabbled and filled with mud and leaves. His nose was bleeding fearfully from a blow of Dan's fist, for this was the only weapon the old ranger had been able to use against his enemy. Dan was nearly stripped of his clothing. His long hair hung down over his eyes, and clung to his face like seaweed to a rock. Altogether, the two antagonists presented a sad and sorry plight, that under any other circumstances would have provoked their friends to laughter.

Signs of exhaustion were manifested by both, and still their movements were so rapid and uncertain that neither one's friends dare risk a shot in his behalf. They had floundered out into the center of the pond where the water was deepest, and the advantage seemed to rest first with one, then the other. They would grapple with each other, and sinking beneath the water, would fight until out of breath; then separate, rise to the surface again close in deadly combat, only to go down again. Thus the struggle had lasted for several minutes, but it was plainly evident that they could not keep it up much longer; and finally they grappled and went down—down for the last time. The layer of leaves closed over the spot where they sunk; a few bubbles came to the surface; the bosom of the pool quivered. A minute—two minutes passed. Already the foes had been under the water beyond the limits of human endurance.

A horrible suspense took possession of the rangers, for the fate of Dakota Dan seemed forever sealed; and after fully five minutes had elapsed, and all hopes had vanished from their breasts, Darcy Cooper discovered an agitation of the leaves which covered the pond, that at once arrested their attention. They seemed to swell upward as though something possessed of life was swimming on the surface of the water under them; and, whatever it was, was moving toward the opposite shore.

"Boys, I solemnly believe," said Idaho Tom, when his attention had been drawn to the movement, "that it is the head of one of the combatants swimming under the leaves. Either Dan or the savage lives, and aware of the presence of enemies is trying to escape by stealing along in the water with his head concealed under that layer of plants and leaves."

"Then it must be the savage, for he is going toward the opposite shore," said Walton. "S'pose I try a shot at the spot where the leaves are bulging up?"

"No, no; it may be Dan, who, in confusion of mind, does not know whether he is going to the east or west shore. But, hold your guns in readiness to cover his escape, should it be the ranger; or, to shoot the victor, should it prove to be the savage."

Scarcely had he finished speaking when his worst fears were realized: a savage sprung out of the water and endeavored to escape ashore. But, the unerring rifles of the rangers pealed out, and he fell riddled with bullets.

"There, they are both dead," said Idaho Tom, with a sadness in his tone. "Poor old Dan! he has followed his last trail—fought his last battle."

Humility, who was squatted near, seemed to have comprehended the young ranger's words, for he thrust his nose upward and sent forth a sad, plaintive and mournful cry.

CHAPTER XXI.

SURROUNDED.

A SOLEMN hush fell upon the little band of rangers.

The wind whispered in hollow tones among the trees—a frog croaked on the margin of the hidden pool.

Again Humility sent forth a mournful, quivering howl, and was answered by the shrill whinny of old Patience out in the woods.

Now and then a savage rifle broke through the stillness and provoked a shot from the rangers.

"Boys," said Tom, sadly, "we must get out of this."

"Yes; I can see no need of remaining here now."

"Bruff! bruff!" barked Humility, sulkily, and all saw the dog, with lowered head, peeping across the water, through an opening in the undergrowth, while his tail was wagging in an eager, delighted way.

"What does the animal see, anyhow?" asked Tom, bending his own gaze in the same direction as the dog's; "ah! blessed sight! Look! look!"

He pointed toward the opposite shore of the pool, and close under the grass-lined bank, all saw a human head protruding half above the layer of leaves, with the face turned toward them. A long finger was held up before it, significant of silence: it was the face of Dakota Dan!

A shout rose to the lips of the rangers, but Idaho Tom promptly suppressed it.

"Silence is golden, now, boys," he said; "one word significant of triumph might call the attention of the savages to the escape of our friend, and result in his death. See! the old dare-devil is creeping along under the overhanging fringe of grass, right into danger. If I dared to venture out, or call to him, I might apprise him of his proximity to the savages over there."

As if in answer to the question uppermost in their minds, old Dan stopped again, pointed ahead, held up a small jack-knife, made a circling sweep around his head, then resumed his silent advance along under the bank and grass.

The rangers scarcely breathed, so deep were their suspense and surprise over the provoking recklessness of the old borderman. Instead of improving the opportunity first offered for escape, he was rashly courting greater dangers. It is true, he was screened from the savage eyes on his side of the pool, but there was no telling what instant a shot from some other direction would end his eventful career.

He crept softly along close against the bank until further progress was disputed by the body of his late foe, which was hanging half over the bank, his head in the water. Reaching out, the old ranger clutched the warrior by the scalp-lock, and described a circle around his head with the other hand quicker than a flash.

Then it was that the rangers saw what he had been after—the scalp of his enemy! But now, how was he to get away with it, without exposing himself to the guns of the enemy? This was the question that the rangers could not determine; but even while they were discussing it, they saw the man, who had crept on a few rods, disappear in a kind of cove or bay in the end of the pool.

Scarcely three minutes from that time, Dakota Dan made his appearance in the midst of his friends—the sorriest and most doleful-looking specimen of humanity the rangers had ever seen. Even Humility himself shied off, either in doubt as to who the man was, or else through fear that his master would repeat the cruel treatment of a few minutes previous when he lost a portion of his ear.

"Ha! ha! ha! Humility, old dorg!" the ranger laughed, "don't you know me, purp? I am Dan Rackback, a part and passel of the Triangle. Whit, Humility; I thought you'd not go back on me, ole purp. Boys, wa'n't that a reglar frog-fight?"

"On a large scale—yes," answered Tom; "but we'd given you up as dead."

"I'd 'a' been dead afore this, but I managed to slip away from the red-skin while under the water. He war a monstrous strong Ingin, and then he war in the very dinner-time of life, while the supper tea-pot with me's beginning to bile. I are a leetle shaky in the limbs, and my wind's not as strong as it used to was. I can't git up as lively a hurricane as I did once. Age is tellin' on me, and I tackled that red-skin on purpose to test my age in a physical sense. You can't alers judge one's age by his years. I think I'm good fur quite a spell yet, so fur as nateral consequences are concerned; but then, boys, I'm feelin' monstrous soggy in these 'ere duds, what's left on me, and I must look arter a change, if it's only to take these off and go naked."

"We can furnish you a dry suit, Dan, from among our scanty wardrobes," said Idaho Tom.

"I'm sure I'll be much obleeged to you for 'em, capt'in; for I feel mortal oneasy in these 'ere damp rags."

Tom and Dan hastened to camp, the others remaining behind to watch the movements of the savages.

In a few minutes they returned, Dan trigged out in a suit made up from the rangers' wardrobes. He had also recovered his rifle and accouterments where he had dropped them when he engaged the savage, and now he stood ready for any emergency.

There was no way by which our friends could estimate the enemy's force, consequently they knew not what danger menaced them. They knew, however, that the foe was not mounted, and while the way was open for escape, Dakota Dan advised an immediate departure from the grove, as there was no telling what trap the savages might spring upon them. So, hurrying back to camp, the rangers saddled their horses and rode westward out of the grove. As soon as they had reached the open plain, they turned north, and putting spur galloped away, leaving grove and savages behind.

Nothing more was seen of the enemy, and they rode on until they struck the banks of the Big Ohayenne river, when they halted to noon—resuming their journey after an hour's stop.

"I'm thinkin' we ort to strike Major Loomis' camp, afore

long," Dan said, as the day wore on. "It may be that the red devils have scared him out, and he's turned back."

"It's rather singular that the troops hereaway can't keep those renegade Indians on their reservation," said Idaho Tom, "so that the lives of unprotected and unsuspecting people will be safe."

"Wal, now, cap'n," replied Dan, "just turn it around and wonder why the troops can't keep reckless miners out of the Hills. It's six of one and half a dozen of t'other."

"Yes, if we accept of it in that light; the miners, however, do not molest them when they intrude on Indian ground; but the Indians have to kill and murder when they get out from home."

"You can't much blame the ignorant, bloody boogers when we take into consideration the fact that white men—outlaws and robbers—are at the head of all deviltry."

"That's true, Dan," admitted Tom; "we've had some experience of late with Prairie Paul's band; in fact, we had a big fight with a pack of them. One of their number, one Kit Bandy, deserted the band and came away with us as far as the Powder river, and there we lost him in fording the stream. He was a queer man, and I regret very much that he was lost. I don't know whether he was drowned, or captured, or deserted us. At any rate, I hope we will meet him again some day for I took quite a liking to him."

"Tom, why are you so interested in Kit Bandy?" asked Darcy Cooper. "I noticed you took more than usual interest in him. Have you ever known him before?"

"Darcy, Kit Bandy holds within his breast that which may be more to me than all the wealth of the Black Hills."

The rangers were surprised by this answer, and Darcy would have questioned him further, but at this juncture Dan spoke.

"Some gal at the bottom of it," he said, "jist like as any way. But, boys, speakin' of a gal reminds me of the one that got away from us last night. I can hardly decide which is my honest duty—to go on till I find Loomis, or turn back and search for that girl, be she dead or alive."

"Dan," said Tom, "my conscience has been upbraiding me all day for leaving that prairie without knowing something definite about that maiden; and I am ready this minute to turn back—"

"Rein up! rein up!—somethin' wrong with the dog!" exclaimed Dan. "What is it, Humility?"

The dog glided along through the grass with his nose to the earth as if following a trail; but he only went a short way and then came bounding back uneasily.

"Somethin's not right—Humility's struck a trail."

They were still in the Big Cheyenne bottom and about a mile from the stream. Half a mile to their left rose a range of tall bluffs, that continued on around in a curve to the river in front of them. The grass around was a species of slough-grass closely allied to swamp reeds. It was thick, almost, as it could stand, and in hight, reached to the back of the tallest horse.

The place was an admirable one for an ambushade; and more than once during their conversation, Dan had observed the fact.

Dan dismounted to inquire more closely into his dog's uneasiness. He searched the ground closely, and to his surprise, discovered the imprint of hooved feet in the soil. Before he could communicate the fact to his friends, however, the clear, sharp twang of a horn came leaping down from the northern bluffs.

The rangers started as though a torpedo had burst in their midst. They glanced across toward the bluff on their right, where they beheld a number of mounted Indians drawn up in a group, looking toward them. Idaho Tom took a small field-glass from among his effects, and scanned the party.

"By heavens!" he exclaimed, when he had looked a moment, "there are a number of white men among those savages; and the most conspicuous of all is the notorious Prairie Paul, the Pirate of the Gold Hills!"

"You don't say?" exclaimed Dan, startled by the announcement. "What in thunder does the varmint mean, I'd like to know? Surely he don't take us for friends, and's blowin' his bazzoo to call us over thar? Hear the fool!"

Another blast from the outlaw's horn rung, in quavering intonations, down the valley. Then all along the summit of the bluffs, to the right and in front, between the rangers and the river, and in the rear of them—cutting off two of their pack animals that had been let loose to follow with their burdens—rose a perfect and continuous circle of mounted savages who had hitherto been concealed in the tall grass.

A yell that shook the very air escaped their lips, as they appeared in view; and it was followed by peal after peal of the outlaw's horn, that seemed rife with mockery and derision. And, not to be outdone, Idaho Tom caught up the bugle at his side, and placing it to his lips, hurled back blast after blast of defiance.

"Boys," said old Dan, "thar's a big fight on hand, with the odds strong against us. We've committed a grave blunder lettin' ourselves run into this trap; but it's no use to lament. Some of us will doubtless fall dead afore we git out of this; but let all dismount, and we will prepare to do our best—fight and die as only brave and desperate men can."

"So be it," responded the rangers, and, dismounting, each man looked to his weapons, and made ready for the coming ordeal.

CHAPTER XXII.

KIT BANDY'S FLIGHT—KIT BANDY'S PROTEGE.

BRISKLY away through the lonely night ambled Kit Bandy on the outlaw's horse.

Silently and impatiently Prairie Paul and his men awaited the old man's return from the ford; but when two hours had passed and he came not, something of the truth began to dawn upon their minds. But by the time they had discovered the absence of the captain's horse, Kit was miles from the river.

Soon after setting out upon his flight, Bandy conceived a hope of overtaking Idaho Tom and party; but in this he was disappointed. He could not find the trail, nor could he have followed it in the darkness, had he even known where it was. So he finally gave up the pursuit, dismounted, and throwing himself under a tree, slept till morning dawned.

The first thing he did, as soon as it was light enough, was to examine the packs strapped to the outlaw's saddle. He found a blanket, some provision, a flask of brandy and a suit of clothes, including coat, pants and cap. The latter articles the captain had doubtless intended to use as soon as he was through with his Indian disguise at the ford.

Kit would have been glad to have donned the suit himself a few hours before, but now he had no need of it, as his own clothes were dry. However, he concluded to keep the entire outfit for future need, and mounting his steed continued on his way. About noon he reached the edge of an open plain, where he stopped for dinner. He succeeded in killing a fine buck, a portion of which he roasted for present and future need in crossing the great prairies of Dakota.

He entered the plain and rode leisurely on until near the middle of the afternoon, when he suddenly discovered that he was being pursued by a party of his late robber-friends.

"Horn of Joshua!" he exclaimed, aloud, to himself; "that won't never do. I can't lie myself away from 'em fellers this time—again; and to be overtaken by the boys will be death, sure pop. So now, old hoss, I know your bottom, and if ever you done the fine thing by man, let it be now, right over this peraro."

He put his horse to its utmost speed and was soon doubling upon the enemy. He had struck the head-waters of a little stream, tributary to the Big Cheyenne river, and was now following along its course, which wound and twisted around among the bluffs and hills like a serpent. Here and there, little clumps of timber were interspersed along the stream. The first ahead was about three miles distant, and no sooner did Kit discover it than he made up his mind to dodge the enemy there if possible. He felt so confident of his ability to accomplish his purpose, that he turned and sent back a shout of defiance.

But, scarcely had the echoes of his voice died upon the air ere his horse stepped into a gopher-mound, and stumbling, almost fell. When it recovered, Kit found that it had been seriously lamed, and his chances of escape reduced to one in twenty. Feeling in hopes, however, that its lameness was only temporary, Kit kept the animal hobbling on until he reached the center of the grove, when he drew rein to consider the next best course for him to pursue.

The enemy was at least two and a half miles behind, and as he had plenty of time, he dismounted to look into the nature and extent of his horse's injuries, while studying over his course. He found its leg already swelling from the effect of a sprained hock, and in another hour he believed it would be past going at all.

"A bad case, and a bad situation," muttered Kit, with a look of disappointment.

Then the horse pricked up its ears and started back with affright.

Kit Bandy gazed wildly around him, and to his astonishment beheld the form of a young girl, or woman, emerge from a thicket of undergrowth and advance toward him with a slow, cautious step.

Had a thunderbolt rent the heavens, Kit would not have been more astonished than he was at sight of the girl there alone in that great solitude. She was young and handsome—possibly not over nineteen years of age. Her features were clear-cut and possessed of more than ordinary womanly beauty. Her eyes were of a soft blue, and her hair a dark brown color.

Her face wore a pale, half-terrified expression, and her eyes looked wild and innocent as a startled fawn's as she approached Kit. She seemed to be in doubt as to whether she was approaching a friend or foe, yet driven by desperation to seek some relief from her destitute condition.

Kit was the first to speak.

"Who in the name of the great and adorable mercy be you, anyway?" he exclaimed.

"A fugitive, half-starved, half-chilled and half-dead," replied the girl, in tones of deep distress.

"Three halves that makes, but still you ar'n't dead," responded Kit; "but, what in the plague are you doin' here?—who are you fleeing from?"

"Everybody but friends; robbers and Indians and wild beasts in particular," she answered, stopping before him. "I was kidnapped from my home at the settlement of Mennovalle, several days ago, put into a wagon with an old negress and carried away upon the prairie. Last night I was liberated by some one, I know not whom. It was dark, and I could not see him, and the moment he assisted me from the wagon, he and his companion got into a fight with the robbers, and in a moment of terror I fled away into the night and became lost on the plain. I wandered around all night and day, and aside

from a few Indians, you are the first human I have seen. And I am not certain now that I have met a friend."

"You can rest easy onto that, little one," Kit said, assuringly; "I'll die for you; that's my nature out and out. But you didn't tell me your name."

"Christie Dorne."

"Dorne, Dorne, did ye say?" asked Kit, reflectively; "I've heard that name—oh, yes! I used to know a feller of that name, but then he lives a thousand miles from here. But, Christie, dinged if I don't die for you, and I'm thinkin' I'll soon have the chance, for Prairie Paul and a dozen men are after me this holy minute—comin' right back here."

"Oh, heavens!" cried the girl, "then I am—"

"Easy, easy, little one; I'll fix 'em," responded Kit; "this hoss 'd be of little account to carry us both, but he must save us, by throwin' the varmints off our trail. Here," he said, removing the bundles that were strapped to the saddle, "take this blanket and this provision, and hide in that thicket till I come for you."

Christie Dorne took the things as requested and concealed herself in the bushes.

Kit Bandy drew his knife and cut a forked bush standing near. He trimmed up the prongs, slipped the outlaw chief's extra pair of pants over them, then hung the coat around the upright stem or trunk, and fastened it there. The top of this was then surmounted with Prairie Paul's cap; and then the ingenious Kit Bandy had a very fair dummy, which he placed astride the horse and fastened securely to the saddle with the lariat-rope. This done, he turned the horse's head southward and gave him a smart blow with a switch that sent him flying with terror out over the plain.

Kit followed to the edge of the grove to note the result of his ruse, and a moment later a loud, ringing laugh burst from his lips. He saw the robber-band turn from their eastward course in pursuit of his mounted dummy, and he knew that it would be a long, hard chase before the trick was discovered; for the horse, relieved of all burden of any consequence, flew rapidly across the plain, terrified by the rattling brush upon his back.

Kit watched the chase a minute or two, then turned and went back to Christie.

"Now, little one," he said, "we're safe for a while at least. I've got the varmints off the trail slicker than a ribbon. And now, Christie, before we start I want you to eat something, for I know you are weak and hungry. Here's some roasted venison I prepared myself to-day at noon; and here's some biscuit I got outen Capt'in Paul's saddle-bags. Eat, rest, and then we'll toddle on down the creek."

Christie ate of the coarse viands with a hearty, good relish; and when she had finished, felt much relieved of the gnawing pain and weakness that comes of long fasting. Her physical powers strengthened, and her spirit correspondingly revived, she seemed like another person to Kit Bandy.

The old mountaineer waited upon his fair young protegee with a rude gallantry that, while it would have been amusing to some, would have been commendable to the same persons. He ran down to the creek and brought her water in a flask-cup which he found among the robber's effects; and when they were ready for departure, he adjusted her shawl about her head and shoulders, then innocently drew her arm in his and set off eastward through the grove.

Christie permitted herself to be conducted away with perfect confidence in her escort. There was something in the man's open face and bluff, outspoken manner that gave her the strongest faith in the honesty of his tendered kindness and protection.

They journeyed on a short distance in comparative silence, Kit betraying an unusual stillness and reticence. Finally, however, he said:

"Miss Christie, I'm afraid there's a long walk for you ahead."

"I feel in hopes we will meet with friends," replied the maiden.

"The chances are that we'll meet enemies fust; but then we'll keep a clear eye and mebbey we can escape the red devils—beg pardon, Miss Christie—meant the red varmints and white robbers. I'm an awful rough old sinner to talk, little one. You see a feller that's eternally mixed up with hunters, and red-skins, and outlaws, can't help but git kind o' roughish-like. I used to be purty handy with grammar, and knowed a deal 'bout science and books; but, years of isolation from them has made me rougher'n a stone-fence. But I perpose to brighten up my knowledge afore long, for I, Kit Bandy, propose to quit this trampin'—"

"Kit Bandy?" exclaimed Christie; "is that your name?"

"Yas, ma'am," he replied, looking down into her face, somewhat puzzled by the manner of her question.

The maiden made no reply, but Kit could see and feel that she was considerably agitated.

"What do you know 'bout Kit Bandy, little one?" he finally asked.

"Nothing," she answered, "only I am inclined to think that Kit Bandy is not the rude, illiterate man he would have me believe."

"Great horn of Joshua! I surely ar'n't makin' out any wuss than I am, the Lord knows. But, if I'd be partickler, and think afore I speak, I might do better. I know I used to be a fair average on common sense—I used to preach a little, and folks used to say that I could make a smackin' good anti-slavery speech. Then I studied law once, and for two years war justice of the peace down at Carson City."

Christie betrayed no little surprise at Kit's words, and when he had concluded, she involuntarily exclaimed:

"Then you are the very man that"—but here she checked herself, and with no little confusion, added: "but what am I talking about, anyway?"

"Speak it right out, Miss Christie," the old man exclaimed; "I believe you know somethin' 'bout me, I sw'ar I do."

"I was thinking of another person, Mr. Bandy," she answered, with a confused smile and an evasive air; but in her mind—to herself she was saying—"Ay! well do I know you, Kit Bandy, and a secret that lies buried in your breast—a secret that would to God I dare speak of to you!"

CHAPTER XXIII.

"CHRISTIE? CHRISTIE?"

THE fact of her knowing Kit Bandy did not give Christie Dorne any uneasiness. On the contrary she seemed more easy and light-hearted in his company, and moved along with a lighter footstep and clearer mind.

Kit believed that she knew, or had heard something about him, notwithstanding her evasive denial; but all questioning failed to elicit anything definite, and so he finally changed the topic of conversation—much to the maiden's relief.

By this time the sun was getting low, and the thoughts of another night upon the prairie made Christie almost sick at heart. It is true, she felt that in Kit Bandy she had a friend and protector; but at the same time this assurance was insufficient to dispel that dread and terror born of the dismal shadows of night.

"I have been lookin' for friends all day, Miss Christie," Kit said, "and I feel in hopes I may yet find them."

"If so, it must be soon, for night is fast closing in upon us," responded Christie.

"Yes, I know it, Miss Dorne; but don't let that worry you. I'll die before harm shall come to you."

"I hope you'll have no occasion to make such a sacrifice for me, Mr. Bandy—"

"Heavens!" he interrupted, "call me Kit Bandy—ole Kit—anything but Mister Bandy."

Christie smiled at his correction and continued:

"When did you lose the friends of whom you speak, Kit?"

"Last night, crossin' the Powder river; but then I s'pects to meet 'em soon again, for Idaho Tom's not the man to desert a friend in—"

"Idaho Tom, did you say?" Christie exclaimed, in a tone that betrayed the deepest surprise.

"I did say Idaho Tom; but now what's up again? Do you know Idaho Tom, the Outlaw of Silverland?"

"I know him—I know him well," she answered, her eyes sparkling with the light of some inward joy and happiness.

Kit saw that he had at last touched upon the right chord of her sad, desponding heart—that the name, Idaho Tom, had aroused her from a lethargy that was fast overcoming her spirit and physical energy.

"Well," the old man finally observed, "you're jist like all the female weemen, Christie—awful savin' of your secrets. But then it's all right; old Kit Bandy has no desire to know other folkses business. But I tell you what, that Idaho Tom is a splendid young feller, and I shouldn't wonder if you didn't love him. If I war a gal, I know I would. I do love Tom, al, ow."

Christie blushed deeply and made no answer, for at this juncture her attention was attracted by an object moving along the summit of a ridge a mile or more before them.

"I've been watchin' it for some time," Kit said, when she called his attention to it. "I think it's the head of a horseman behind the hill, and he may be tryin' to keep out of sight and at the same time watch us; therefore I've a notion to bend my course and cross over to the Cheyenne valley. It's not more'n a mile away, and then we'll be more apt to meet the boys or friends there than here."

"Take the course you think best and safest, Kit," Christie answered, "and I am sure I will be satisfied."

They turned north, crossed the little creek, and ascended the slope to the summit of the range of bluffs overlooking the Cheyenne valley. Here a sight met their view that brought them to an abrupt halt, and forced an exclamation of surprise from their lips.

It was a number of horsemen, whom Kit recognized at a glance, on the river bottom, surrounded by at least a hundred Indians and outlaws.

"Great Horn of Joshua!" exclaimed Kit, "that's Idaho Tom and his boys; and the red vagrants of the Old Scratch have got 'em hemmed in!"

A look of despair settled upon Christie's face, and a moan of agony escaped her lips. She seemed completely overcome by the startling news, sunk down in the grass, and burying her face in her hands, wept bitterly.

"Don't take on, little one, don't take on. Night will soon settle over us, and if the enemy don't close in upon the boys by that time, I'll bet they'll cut their way out—ah! hark!"

Kit threw himself prostrate in the grass at Christie's side, and the next moment two horses thundered over the hill and down past them. Both were riderless, and Kit recognized them, by the packs on their backs, as two of the pack horses belonging to Idaho Tom's party.

Bandy said nothing further that would add anew to Christie's despondency, but quietly watched the movements of those on the plain. He saw that the Indians made no violent

demonstrations, but that they were intent upon some hostile movement, he had not a single doubt; and when darkness shut all from view they still maintained their first position.

The old man now became restless. He wanted to assist the young rangers out of their difficulty, and so expressed himself to Christie.

"If you can assist them, Kit, go, and may God speed you," the maiden replied; "I will wait here by the side of this old Indian trail till you come. If you pass the enemies' lines, and meet him—Idaho Tom—tell him that I am here, and he will come to me."

"Love, love," mused the old man to himself, then continued aloud: "I will do so, Christie. Now wrap this blanket around you, and don't leave this spot nor worry. First and foremost I want to find out what the varmints intend to do, then I'll go through to the boys or kill every Ingin down thar. You remember and stay right here, little one, and God'll watch over you."

So saying, Kit turned and moved away.

Then alone, upon bended knee, in the depth of the great plain, Christie, with clasped hands and tremulous lips, sent up an humble and fervent supplication to the Great Father and Protector of all.

It was a solemn and affecting scene, that frail young creature kneeling there alone in the solitude of the night, her whole soul pouring out its spirit in petition for divine grace and protection.

Two hours went by and found the maiden still alone. It seemed as though night had resolved itself into the blackness and endlessness of eternity.

She had heard, at intervals, the report of firearms, savage yells and shouts; but these only added to her uneasiness and mental torture. And time brought her no relief. Her spirit sunk lower and lower, and it seemed as though she could endure the sharp pangs of silence and inactivity but little longer, when to her relief, she suddenly heard the sound of hooved feet coming along the trail. It was a relief, because it broke the dread monotony of the darkness and its horrible silence; but she knew not whether a friend or foe was coming toward her. To make sure, however, she was about to step aside when she heard a voice call out:

"Christie? Christie?"

CHAPTER XXIV.

OLD PATIENCE SHOWS HER ACCOMPLISHMENTS.

To Dakota Dan, as well as the young rangers, it seemed singular enough that they should permit themselves to ride blindly into such a trap of the enemy, as that in which they now found that they were caught. And the idea of escape by retracing their footsteps through the opening that had admitted them to the circle of enemies, was no sooner suggested than they saw the gap in the line behind them closed up by a score of armed and mounted men. Escape was completely cut off, for in whatever direction they might look, they could see savages and outlaws gazing toward them. All, however, remained still, and as the nearest were over sixty rods away, none attempted to use their rifles.

The rangers dismounted and hastily arranged their weapons for a conflict. All but Dakota Dan were armed with repeating rifles, besides a brace of revolvers to each man. The former weapons could be used at long range, and the latter in close encounter, thus making each ranger equal to half a score of men. Of this the enemy seemed fully cognizant, and made no haste to precipitate matters, although the young men expected a charge at any moment.

They were happily disappointed, however, to see that the enemy made no move, as the hours advanced. But they could see Prairie Paul galloping around the line as if imparting orders and instructions. Now and then a fiendish shout would greet his approach at different points, which told the rangers that the outlaw was plotting some deviltry that met the approval of the savages.

"They may wait until night sets in," said old Dan, "in which case it will make it all the worse for us. There is one thing about them Ingins, however, that'll make them less blood-thirsty than they might be. You see they are to their tribe what them outlaws are to their race, in one sense of the word. They are violating the stipulations of their treaty, and while the tribe'll be held amenable for all acts of its members to the government, those outlaw Indians will be held amenable to the tribe. Prairie Paul, however, is at the head of the whole thing—the prime instigator, and in order to hold his influence over them, he'll not be very apt to urge them into anything that'll precipitate the tribe into difficulty with the government. I know somethin' about this red and white outlawry, though I may be mistaken as to the intention of these varmints. And, boys, you may do as you please 'bout some things, but you don't want to miss a chance to shoot the fust red-skin or robber you git a chance at. You want to improve every opportunity to obliterate the lopin' varmints. This is the imperative rule of the Triangle; whenever thar's a chance, man, hoof and howler gits into operation, and then—oh, then! you ort to see the fur fly. Jist let the lopin' varmints come on, if you want to see how the exterminator works. We haven't had a real solid chunk of a fight for a long time."

"I think we saw a bit of a tussle this morning," remarked Darcy Cooper.

"That war only a part of the machine at work—only old

Dan Rackback. The hull Triangle's composed of me, Patience, my mare here, and Humility, my dorg thar. When we fight alone, it's nothin' more'n a common thing; but when all three goes into cahoots, then you ort to see how nice, beaucheful and slick the cogs mash together. Great Jubilee! you'd think old Patience war incircled with heels, and that Humility had a head on every end and corner, they whirl, and flip, and dash, and cavort around so, like a bug on a hot griddle. Yes, Thomas, them red-skins and robbers may be tryin' to intimidate us into terms; but we mustn't let 'em fool us. If we'll jist show 'em that we'd rather fight than run, they'll look a leetle out. The greatest danger is of their firing the prairie around us."

"In that case we might cut our way through to the river," said Tom.

"At the risk of a life or two," said Dan, shaking his head. "No, no; we don't want to lose a man. Thar's more in savin' your men than in gainin' a victory. Water, you see, 'll be our greatest want if we are kept here a day or two."

"Yes, that is very true," answered Tom. "If our pack animals hadn't been cut off, we would now have implements with which we could soon sink a well in this low bottom land."

"But that we ain't got, Thomas; so we've got to do the next best thing—hullo! thar comes a flag of truck, as I am born!"

True enough, one of the robbers, with a flag of truce, was seen to leave the group on one of the hills and gallop toward the boy brigade.

The latter had all dismounted, but in order that a fair view might be had of the surrounding plain, a man was mounted upon a horse to keep watch.

The truce-bearer approached, and was received by old Dan with the salutation:

"Wal, now, what might you be wantin' here with that rag?"

"To effect some terms of compromise," was the man's answer.

"That's queer, now, 'ca'se we've no compromise to make," returned Dan.

"Then you'll have to fight a battle," was the man's reply.

"That's what we want—it's our best holts—what we like—what we've been waitin' fur. We'd rather fight than eat, fur we're royal old fighters of Spartan descent. We've a machine here that's akeal to a tornado fightin' when it gits its wind up."

"I think it's gittin' the wind up, now," replied the outlaw with sarcasm.

"Yes; and be keeful, old sinner, or a gust 'll take you amidships. We're all spoilin' for a fight, and wish you'd run back and tell your friends to waltz down this way if they want fun. Howsumever, you might state your terms, jist so's we kin see what fools you are."

"Exactly," said the man, with a satirical smile; "I thought you'd like to know our terms, which are these: the delivery of a certain paper in the possession of Dakota Dan, and recompense for horses killed by him two days ago, in consideration of which you will be permitted to go free upon your way."

"Perzactly," mused Dan; "that's very reasonable. But, as to the paper, you can have that, and as to the hoss-pay, why, there isn't five dollars in the crowd."

"You have horses," said the outlaw.

"No. I, Dakota Dan, have only that old firefly thar, but she's wuth her weight in gold, man, without a doubt. You run back and report to the capt'in, and if he accepts my proposition, tell him to send a man down to ride her up—he can have her. I'm honest—willin' to pay damages; but, then, I don't want my offer, under any consideration, to knock us out of a fight. We want a fight—must have a fight—will have a fight, anyhow."

"You may get your satisfaction, sir," said the man, in a threatening manner; then turning about he rode back to where Prairie Paul was awaiting him on the hill.

He reported his interview with the redoubtable Dakota Dan, and the robber-chief was highly pleased with the offer of the old ranger for terms of conciliation. He was satisfied that old Patience was the fastest animal on the plains of Dakota, and concluded to accept his proposition so far as the old ranger, himself, was concerned; but, after that, he had a score to settle with the boy-rangers under Idaho Tom.

"Dan," said Tom, as the outlaw rode away, "suppose they accept your proposition, and send a man down after the paper and your mare?"

"Let them 'cept and send. Here's the paper; you make a copy of it, Tom—quick, for here comes a swaggerin' cuss to ride old Patience away, this holy minute."

Tom took the paper and copied it into a small memoranda—it was the paper Dan had taken from the Indian, Fast-foot.

The second outlaw soon drew near; and all could see that he was a lithe, active fellow, with a keen eye and villainous face.

"The capt'in 'cepts your offer," he said, as he approached the rangers, "and I've come to git the paper and mare."

"All right, sweet William; thar's the paper, and thar's the mare. You'll find her a good one, though she needs no recommend to you fellers. You know her bottom is superb."

The man took the paper and looked it carefully over, then put it in his pocket, and with a satisfied look turned and vaulted onto old Patience's back. All the while the man's face wore a disdainful look that showed his self-conceit and contempt for the rangers.

"By-by, Patience; I alers thought I'd stick to you through thick and thin, for you've been a faithful servant," said Dan, his eyes sparkling with inward delight; then, as the man rode away, he threw himself upon the ground, and, like a mischievous school-boy, rolled and laughed till it seemed as though he would go into spasms.

Finally he rose to his feet and glanced after his mare and her rider, who were now about forty rods away.

"Now, boys," he said, "watch for fun—watch old Patcie teeter up," and, placing his thumb and finger between his lips, he gave utterance to a shrill whistle.

Instantly, almost, Patience was seen to rear up and throw her rider off backward; then, as he touched the ground, the vicious mare's heels went out and her late rider was kicked whirling through the grass; while, with a snort, and head and tail up, Patience came tearing back to camp at the top of her speed.

Again Dan burst into a fit of laughter, and as the mare came up he laid his arm affectionately about her neck and said:

"Oh, you blessed old critter! I knowed you'd foolish that feller, or I'd never 'a' let you gone away from here. Boys, that ends my contract; they failed to handle the property; so it reverts back, accordin' to law and justice. Ay, the sagacity of that mare! she's got more human gumption than any red-skin in yon circle; good blood in her, boys; I can trace her pedigree right back to old Noah's records. But now, look out; I expect that chap got his system busted; and, if so, it'll make times brisk."

Several hours wore away, however, without any further movement on the part of the enemy. They had all dismounted and were lounging about in groups, apparently paying little attention to the rangers. But the latter were not to be caught napping again. They knew well enough that the enemy's indifference was a ruse to provoke them to an attempt to escape.

Finally the shrill blast of a trumpet started the echoes far and near.

In an instant every Indian and outlaw was upon his horse ready for action.

Another blast of the trumpet set them in motion.

Idaho Tom placed his own trumpet to his lips and blew a defiant blast that fairly split the air.

With a yell and a whoop the enemy came thundering toward them.

"Now, boys, it's fight!" exclaimed old Dan.

The rangers' rifles rung out before the enemy was nearer than two hundred yards. But their aim was good and a number of the foe fell. One discharge after another followed so rapidly that an incessant storm of bullets met the enemy's advance, dealing death among their ranks. It seemed as though a hundred rifles, instead of a dozen, were pouring their deadly contents upon the foe.

Prairie Paul seemed to have been taken by surprise, for he immediately sounded a retreat, and the Indians fell back to their former position without firing a dozen shots.

The rangers sent up a shout that fairly shook the earth beneath them.

By this time the sun was low in the western sky, and with a vague anxiety and uneasiness the rangers watched it go down—wondering what the night would bring forth as the murky shadows deepened around them.

All was silent on the plain.

The wind finally blew up and swept down the plain from the north—tumbling and tossing and roaring among the tall, rustling grass.

Once a savage yell and groan was heard following the report of a pistol, but silence succeeded the sounds.

"This is an awful night, boys, for a prairie-fire," said old Dan, "and if them demons should fire this grass we'd all be fried into a knotty cracklin'. But, let 'em strike in—we can fight fire with fire, let the consequence be what it may. But, lookey here, youngsters; me and Humility, my dorg, 'd better make a little scout hereaways, and I'arn, if possible, what's the go—might raise a scalp."

Before any one could express dissent or approval, the old ranger and his dog were gone. But he had scarcely time to have gone a dozen steps ere Humility was heard to utter a low, fierce growl, then followed the sounds of a deadly struggle. Blows, execrations, the crashing of the dry grass and the growls of the dog, told that Dakota Dan and his dumb friend were in trouble.

CHAPTER XXV.

FOES THEY GRAPPLE—FRIENDS THEY GREET.

Idaho Tom and Darcy Cooper made their way in the direction from whence the sound of the conflict came, and soon reached the combatants. They were in a little opening where the grass had been drowned out by the water, but was now dry. The rangers could see the combatants but faintly, yet plain enough to see that it was not an Indian that engaged Dan and Humility, but a tall, powerful man who had both the old ranger and his dog in limbo.

Dan was lying prone upon his stomach, while his big adversary sat astride him with Humility grasped by the throat and almost dead from strangulation.

"By the ram's horn that blowed down old Jericho!" Tom and Darcy heard the unknown enemy exclaim, as he fiercely shook the dog, "I'll sha—ke the tar—nal tail off ahind the ears—thar, now, lay thar, you t'arnal brute," and he dashed the dog to earth apparently lifeless.

At this juncture the struggle assumed a different phase. Old Dan, by a sudden movement, succeeded in flopping his enemy off his back, when both rose to their feet. Dan made a drive at his enemy, who had lost his hat in the fight, and, catching him by the hair, jerked him full length upon the earth.

"Gosh dim it, man!—horn!—Joshua!—Jericho!" bawled the enemy, "you're skulpin' me! Let up, I say, for I'll be eternally blasted if this isn't—oh, Lord! Can it be her? Sabina! Sabina! for the love of life let go—I'll promise obedience—to love, cherish and obe—Lord!"

"It's old Kit Bandy, Tom," said Darcy Cooper.

"Hold! hold, here, men!" cried Tom, leaping into the opening and seizing them, "hold, for you are friends, not foes!"

"Heavens! you don't say?" cried Dan, releasing his hold on old Kit's hair and starting back aghast.

"Cats and furies!" cried Bandy, scrambling to his feet, "thar is a mistake. I knowed it. Ingins don't fight like ole wild-cat women."

"By Judea! ole long-legs," returned Dan, "you don't want to fool around a tornado in any sich a way ag'in."

"Oh, horn of Joshua! I never had sich a hair-pullin' since me and old Sabina parted; but, Thomas, how do you do?" and Kit grasped Idaho Tom by the hand; "glad to meet ye, boys—been workin' all night to git over here—had to exterminate three or four Ingins gittin' in, then come dogged nigh killin' that feller and his dog. That darned hound-critter took a hull hunk out of my ham, but I reckon now I choked the stuffin' outen him."

Kit and Tom greeted each other with a cordial shake of the hands, then the latter said:

"It's a wonder you are alive, Kit; for you have been fighting with the redoubtable Dakota Dan, the ranger."

"Oh, great horn that bu'sted up old Jericho! do you mean it? is it a fact?" exclaimed Bandy.

"It is; Dakota Dan, this is our old friend, Kit Bandy, on whom I have been telling you," said Idaho Tom.

"Shake, Bandy, shake," was Dan's rejoinder.

"Heartily, heartily!" exclaimed Kit, and the two old fellows slapped their hands together with a noise that sounded like the report of a pistol, and as desperately as they had fought each other a moment or two before they now shook each other's hands.

"Glad to meet ye, Dan-yil; heard of ye several years ago," said Kit, "and I alers s'posed you war my match at anything."

"And I congratulate you on yer escape jist now, friend Bandy," responded Dan.

"Wal, now, Dan-yil, you'd make me b'lieve you war about to exterminate me, wouldn't ye? Whose dog got the dasted gizzard squoozed out of him jist now? But I see the 'tarnal critter's come to and's lickin' his chops as though he liked it, confound him; a hull chunk blocked right outen my ham, Dan-yil, by that dasted dog."

Dan laughed heartily, for he saw that Humility had about recovered from his choking, at the same time knew that Bandy was exaggerating the truth respecting his wounds.

"Great horn that tooted around old Jericho!" Kit continued, "I wish I had old Sphynx, Dan-yil—the dorg I used to own. I'd show you a thing 'bout dorgs, if I had; for Sphynx could out-run, out-fight, out-eat, out-bark, out-howl, out—"

"Hold on, thar! Stop right thar, Bourbon. This is not a good place to dispute; but I'll bet your dorg war no sich a critter as that Humility."

"He wa'n't, eh?"

"No; I'll bet he couldn't chaw up a gun-barrel."

"Humph! I didn't say he could."

"Nor whoop a nest of grizzlies."

"I'd like to see the dorg that could."

"Nor run a mile so quick that you could see a dog on both ends of the mile at the same time."

"No; that's faster than greased lightnin'."

"Nor bark so loud that the water splashed in the river."

"You're gittin' preposterous."

"Not a bit of it, for my dog Humility can do all that, and more too. Jist throw him yer revolvers and hear him crunch 'em up."

"Oh, bazzoo of Ananias!" groaned Kit, "if you ar'n't the most nateral transfiggerater of the truth I ever met. Dan-yil, I'll bet you're a pu'fect stranger to the gospel truth and undulterated water. Did you ever even think the truth, Danyil?"

"Yas," drawled Dan. "I jist this minute thought you war the dog-gonedest ugliest critter that ever hopped on two feet outside of a cage."

Tom and Darcy could hold in no longer, and burst into laugh.

"Shake ag'in, Dan-yil! Guess we can bunk together without contaminatin' each other's morals or beauty. But now let me ax you tellers what in thunderation are you doin' in here, with a million red-skins around ye?"

"Tryin' to git out," was Dan's laconic answer.

"Wal, ahem!" stammered Kit, "if you've the trouble gittin' out that I had gittin' in, you'll have some choice fun."

"That's what we want," said Tom; "but what do you think the prospect is, Kit?"

"Good, to git your jackets warmed. I've been layin' under sound of Prairie Paul's voice ever since dark; and I heard

him send orders around to fire the prairie on the north and river side at about midnight—he was to give the signal with his horn—three stout peals.”

“That’s as I feared,” said Dan; “but did you learn their object, Bandy?”

“Why, arter the fire was started, they were to mass their hull force on the west and south sides, and when the flames drive you out, they’ll plug it to you hissin’ hot. That’s their program’e, and to tell ye these facts, hev I fought, bled and died to git in here. And what’s more, I’ve got to git out again right away.”

“Why have you?”

“Well, the other night when I got separated from you in crossing the ford—but I’ll tell you about that another time. To-day when I got down onto the plains, what did I find in a little motte but a woman—a gal—an angel.”

Tom started, and approached nearer to Kit, as though he was in doubt as to what he had heard.

“Found a girl, did you say?” he said.

“Yes, a girl; a sweet, purty girl, half-starved and chilled to death. But I give her some food out of Prairie Paul’s saddle-bags, what I got up to the ford when, thro’ mistake, I mounted the wrong boss, and I wrapped her in a blanket and conducted her homeward. When we see’d the predicament you war in, I left her—I had to—on the summit of a certain ridge, with instruction to stay thar till I come back.”

“I daresay it is the girl we rescued, Dan, from the outlaws’ wagon,” said Idaho Tom.

“What’s that, Tom?” exclaimed Kit; “did you say you rescued a gal from a robbers’ wagon?”

Tom narrated his and Dan’s adventure on the prairie the night previous.

“That’s the same gal, Thomas—the same gal.”

“Did you learn her name, Kit?”

“Ya-as, Thomas, I did; and, come to think, she told me tell you that it was Christie Dorne.”

“Christie Dorne?” cried Tom, betraying the deepest emotion; “Kit, you don’t mean to tell me this for the truth?”

“I do, Tom—anyhow, that’s what she told me. Her folks live down at Mennovale on the Niobrara, and some time ago her brother started off up this way with a party under one Major Loomis, to hunt buffalo; and he had been gone but a day or two, when a party of reputed hunters, with a wagon, four horses, and a nigger driver, come that way, stopped a day or two in the settlement, then passed on. And two days later, she war kidnapped by two of the villains, carried away and placed in a cage in the wagon, with a nigger wench who waited on her, and kept her asleep most of the time with some kind of a drug.”

“My God! why didn’t I know this sooner?” cried Idaho Tom, in the greatest excitement. “Kit, send me to her assistance—I must go! Give me the course and directions to find her, and I will ride to her through fire and death.”

“You know her, don’t you, Tom?”

“Ask me no questions, Kit; but please do as I request.”

“Wal, now, I see you mean it, boy; and if go you will, I’ll tell you the way. You can’t miss her, I know. You want to pass through the enemy’s line, keep straight down the river to the mouth of the fast creek, turn up the creek and foller it south till you strike an old Ingin trail, then foller that trail west till you strike the gal; she war to stay by the trail on the ridge.”

“Boys, I hope you may make good your escape from here,” said Tom, and hurrying back to the main party, he mounted his horse and galloped away, at a furious speed, down the river.

Savage yells and the report of fire-arms told when he reached the enemy’s line, but whether he passed alive, his friends had no means of ascertaining.

“That man and that gal knows each other,” said Kit Bandy—“ay, they love each other.”

“I daresay they do, Kit,” said Darcy Cooper; “for more than once have we heard the name, Christie, pronounced by his lips when he slept. I assure you Tom loves that girl. We have often remarked that Tom was being drawn east of the mountains by some influence stronger than the love of adventure. His object has been to reach the Missouri river by passing through the Black Hills, and down the Niobrara valley; and I am as well satisfied now as I want to be, that it was to see this girl, Christie, that he planned this trip across the mountains.”

“Ay, that’s it!” sighed Dakota Dan; “love in a young man’s heart is a powerful thing; and past findin’ out. I war never afflicted but once that way in my young days, but the object of my love married another feller, and when I heard last year that she war the mother of sixteen children, I just thought what a deluge I’d escaped.”

“Dan-yil, you war more fortunate than I,” said old Kit; “when old Sabina and I war harnessed together for life, we war the hap— There, by heavens! goes the robber’s horn! Now, boys, look out, the tug of war is comin’!”

The next instant a hundred tongues of flame pierced the gloom at as many points north and east of them. Great volumes of black smoke went rolling and tumbling into the sky, and a moment later a continuous wall of flame came sweeping down the plain—a mighty billow of roaring, seething fire!

CHAPTER XXVI.

A JOYOUS MEETING BUT SAD PARTING.

IDAHO TOM observed no silence in approaching the enemy’s line, but rode at the top of his animal’s speed. And fortunately for him, the Indians were concentrating their forces on the south side preparatory to firing the plain, and the confusion created thereby drowned the sound of his horse’s hoofs; and not until he was through their lines did they discover his flight.

They fired a few random shots after him, but all fell wide of their mark. A few warriors gave chase, but as they could follow only by sound, the noise of their own animals’ feet drowned all noise made by the fugitive’s, and so they were compelled to relinquish the chase and return to their friends.

Tom continued on, down the river, as directed, until he reached the creek; then he turned and rode southward along the latter stream until he reached the old Indian trail running in a nor-nor-west direction over the hill. He followed this path nearly a mile, when he found himself on a high ridge, and near where he supposed the maiden was concealed. Here he dismounted, and in order to see more distinctly, he stooped down and glanced along the plain; when, sight of rapture! he beheld an object dimly outlined against the murky sky. It was but a short distance away, and leading his horse he advanced toward it, calling out:

“Christie? Christie?”

“Is it you, Mr. Bandy?” a half-subdued voice asked.

Tom’s heart seemed to rise up and choke him, and for a moment his brain was dizzy with delight. Recovering himself, however, he answered:

“No, Christie, my darling girl; it is Idaho Tom.”

A little cry and the flutter of feet through the grass followed, then the two embraced each other with that infinite joy and rapturous silence of “two hearts that beat as one.” For fully a minute a deep stillness, broken only by Christie’s sobs, reigned supreme. Alone under the shadows of night the lovers held speechless communion through medium of love’s instinct.

Tom was the first to break the holy silence.

“Oh, my darling!” he exclaimed, “why did I not know it was you, the night I rescued you from that prison-wagon on the plain south of here?”

Christie could only answer in sobs.

“I feel provoked at my own stupidity in that matter,” Tom continued, “for never until Kit Bandy told me it was you, did I dream of such a thing. And had you known it was I, you would not have left me.”

“No, no, dear Tom,” Christie said, her trembling voice full of the confidence and pathos of love.

“You can rest easy now, love, for I think you are safe, for a time at least.”

“I feel so, Tom,” she answered, “but, oh, how I have suffered since I was taken from home! I am almost distracted, Tom—about exhausted in body and mind.”

“My poor darling,” Tom said, kissing her cold brow, “you shall suffer no more, God willing. Little did I think when we parted a year ago at Virginia City, and when I wrote you that I would make a trip this way during the fall, that we would meet under such trying circumstances. But, Christie, you are shivering in this chill air—here, draw this blanket closer around you—there now.”

“I am not as chilly, Tom, as I was. I have been walking about to keep warm since Kit Bandy left me alone. Some horsemen passed me awhile ago and I was greatly afraid that they would discover me. But when they passed me, you don’t know how relieved I was. My cheeks fairly burned and my fingers tingled with heat.”

“Kit Bandy told me, Christie, how you came to be a lonely fugitive on this plain; and I believe he told me your friends were away upon a hunting excursion.”

“Yes; they all went away with Major Loomis on a hunting excursion away up north. Brother Herbert wanted me to accompany them, as Major Loomis’ daughter and four other of the company’s lady friends were going. But I declined, through fear that you would come, Tom, while I was away.”

“My dear Christie, then you have suffered all this through your undying love for me. Oh, that I could repay you a thousandfold for all this patient suffering!”

“For you, Tom, I would pass through all again,” she said, resting to his throbbing heart.

“God bless you, darling; you need never risk anything to hold my love for you. Not even death could sever the tie that binds us together, in one sense of the word.”

“I believe it, Tom; for all my friends have told me, time and again, that you would soon forget me—that your love was but a boyish infatuation that time would banish from your mind and heart.”

“When will I be considered a man, anyway?” replied Tom; “if not until I throw aside my boyish spirit, then I will never be a man. Years ago they told me that I was possessed of a boyish infatuation for Miss Zoe Leland, the maid of Lake Tahoe. But then I was a boy, even in years; now I am four-and-twenty—a man in years. Then my mind and heart were not fixed—now they are. I took the advice and counsel of my old friend, Zedekiah Dee, and lived a different life from that date—lived to make myself worthy of your love, Christie. But, Christie, did you not recognize old Kit Bandy?”

“Yes, Tom; I recognized him the moment he told me his name. He saw that I recognized—knew him—and tried hard to find out how I had learned who he was. He never once mistrusted who I was.”

"I have been with him some time with the same result," added Tom.

"Then the secret of that memorable night has been well kept," said Christie; "though there have been times—one in particular, Tom—when it seemed as though I would be compelled to unload my breast of the secret to brother Herbert, in order to save my life. And there are times when it haunts my soul like the shadow of some awful crime; but only when I have thought that if not one of those persons, who were at the mine that night, could ever be found to bear witness to—But, Tom, God knows there is nothing I have done in the past that I regret. But I have wanted to break that secret so often for more than one reason. I have been besieged by the avowed love of a gentleman named Farwell, who, time and again, has asked me to be his wife. Brother Herbert favors him, and even went so far as to make arrangements to conceal what he calls my disgrace and shame. Oh, Tom!" she said, with bitter anguish, "I can stand it no longer!"

"My poor darling, you shall not suffer longer. If your brother is actuated by selfish and resentful motives, I shall no longer court his friendship, but take you away. There is a point where patience ceases to be a virtue, and I think that point has been reached in our case. I shall take you home, Christie; then plainly tell your brother serious facts, and with you and all the evidence of your disgrace, take you away. But what are his objections to me now?"

"He looks upon you as an adventurer, and often speaks of Idaho Tom, the Outlaw of Silverland."

"He may have cause to speak more kindly of me some day," Tom observed.

"I hope so, at least—oh, dear! what is the meaning of that, Tom?"

She pointed east where the whole heavens were suddenly lit with a red glare.

"The outlaws and savages have fired the plain to burn out my friends, old Dakota Dan and Kit Bandy, who are concealed in the tall grass on the river-bottom. I am afraid they will have a narrow escape. Ten young men, who, all unconscious of what I came hither for, accompanied me across the mountains, are now in imminent peril, surrounded by fire and savages. Ah! it is an awful fire—growing brighter and brighter. You can hear its roar and crackle from here."

True enough, the light glared into the heavens and around—even reaching the spot where our friends stood. It enabled Tom to see the outlines of Christie's face. It looked white and wild, but all its former beauty was there. The great brown eyes; the silken lashes, now wet with tears; the pretty lips and dimpled chin—all set in a wealth of soft brown hair—were the same as when he had parted with her a year previous. Only the rosy glow of her cheeks was gone, but he knew that troubles and trials, through which she had passed so recently, had blanched her face and filled her young heart with fear.

As the light grew brighter, Christie looked up and searched her lover's face with a fond, admiring light in her eyes, and an affectionate smile beaming upon every feature of her pretty face. She saw that he had changed some during the year. His features were more firm and set in the strength of mature manhood. A heavier mustache shaded his handsome, expressive mouth; and his complexion had been changed to the hue of an Indian's, almost, by exposure to the sun and wind. Otherwise, he was the same fine, handsome, brave-hearted Idaho Tom.

For some time the lovers stood regarding each other with joy and pleasure, and epitomizing some strange events that had happened in the lives of each since they had parted—events that the sequel of our story will make known, no doubt to the surprise of the reader.

In the moment of their happiness and joy, the young folks became almost totally oblivious to what was passing around them; but they were suddenly reminded that dangers surrounded them by the sound of horses' feet on the plain to the north of them.

Nothing was visible at the time, but a moment later a horse appeared over the crest of the hill plainly outlined against the red, glaring light from the burning prairie. It was riderless, yet Tom could see that it was heavily loaded, and a second glance told him that it was one of his own pack-animals that he had lost that day. The appearance of the horse alone gave him no uneasiness, but when he saw half a dozen Indians and outlaws suddenly appear in swift pursuit of it, he started with a shudder, and drew Christie closer to his heart.

"Oh, Tom!" she exclaimed, "if they should see us, we will be killed."

"Hush, hush, my darling girl! They will pass us, I hope, without seeing us," said Tom, in an undertone.

They could now see the enemy quite distinctly. They were not over thirty rods away. There were three white men and three savages. They could see the half-nude forms of the latter bent forward in their anxiety to overtake the fleeing animal; they could see the plumes on their tufted heads swaying in the wind, and their blankets whipping about their shoulders. And close behind the red-skins rode the three white men, the broad brims of their hats flared up in front; their long beards floating about their faces in the current of air, their heels tinkling with rowels and their lips reeking with the most horrible oaths.

Tom stood silent as a statue, his eyes following the swift-moving figures. He could feel Christie's heart beating wildly against his own—the only evidence he had that she existed at all, so silent and immovable was she in her fear.

The enemy would pass within seventy-five yards of our young friends, and so great was the excitement of the chase that Tom felt certain they would pass without seeing them, but his hopes were suddenly dispelled, and his heart sickened with fear and disappointment. His own horse seemed to have recognized its hard-chased friend, and uttered a shrill neigh that turned the fugitive horse and brought it directly down toward them.

"Oh, fatal mishap!" cried Tom, "they are coming down upon us! Christie, mount my horse and flee—do not refuse me, dear girl—you must flee! I can save myself—will fight my way through!"

"Tom, they will kill you!" she cried, in anguish of heart; "let me die with you."

He made no reply, but lifting her in his strong arms as though she had been a child, he placed her on the back of his horse.

"Go, Christie! and may God speed you!" he said.

Scarcely conscious of what she was doing, the maiden took up the rein—Tom spoke to his horse, and like a deer it lanced away through the night with its half-unconscious rider.

CHAPTER XXVII.

PLANTING A LIVING MAN.

At the same moment that Christie's horse sped away, the fleeing pack-animal came up, and as it passed Tom he leaped out and seized it by the reins, partly checking its flight, and then endeavored to throw himself upon its back. But, between the continued bounding of the frightened animal and the forward Indian, his escape was prevented entirely.

The savage dashed up and seized the animal by the bits on the side from Tom. Tom drew his revolver and shot the savage dead. The others by this time were upon him, and in rapid succession he fired upon them. An outlaw threw himself from his horse, and running up behind the ranger, threw his powerful arms around him, pinioning his arms at his side. The next moment his two companions came to his assistance.

In a minute more, Tom lay bound and helpless on the earth, while his outlaw captors stood over him cursing with impotent fury and heaping all sorts of anathemas upon the head of the young ranger. And when one of them recognized him as the leader of the band that had camped in the hills, he was threatened with every fate their maddened brains could conceive. He was relieved of all his weapons and every thing of value about his person, even to a picture of the sweet, fair girl who had just left him. But Tom bore all their ill-treatment with unflinching fortitude and cool defiance.

One thing only gave him mental relief in the midst of his troubles: he knew no one was in pursuit of Christie, for he had slain the three Indians, and the three outlaws were before him. This fact encouraged him to hope for her escape, and in case she succeeded in finding friends, he knew she would send them to his relief. But he knew assistance must come soon, for his desperate captors would not long be encumbered with a prisoner—especially with him whose life they had sought for so many days. Already he could hear them openly discussing the disposition that should be made of him. One was in favor of shooting him on the spot, another was in favor of handing him over to the tender mercy of the captain, while the third proposed something else. But none of the suggestions met the approval of the worthy trio, and so they stepped aside to consult in secret. Their decision was soon made; then they all walked back to where he lay.

"I say, young man," said one of the three, "war that pusion that fled from you just now a man or woman?"

"Well, sir, what do you think about it?" was Tom's cool reply.

"Well, we think it war a woman; but then you've got to answer my question, or I'll shove a persuader, in the shape of a boot-toe, into your ribs."

"You will have to go and see," was Tom's defiant answer.

The outlaw kicked him in the side till he groaned, but the main force of the blow was arrested by the young ranger's broad belt.

"It's no use to waste time with a stubborn mule, and as we don't want to kill him here, let's 'plant' him low and tight, and then go in search of his companion. We don't want to let one of them get away, for one can do as much damage with his tongue as a dozen."

So saying, they proceeded to work. One then took from the back of the captured pack-horse the pack of mining tools strapped thereon. Selecting a spade, he began sinking a hole in the ground about two feet square. He worked diligently for several minutes, being finally relieved by a comrade.

Tom shuddered, for he fully comprehended the intention of the villains.

Down and down the pit was sunk, the men laboring by turns with all their strength. Finally one of them took a piece of lariat and measured Tom's body from the heel to the nape of the neck, marking the length on the rope by tying a knot in it. Then they let the measure down in the hole, but finding it of insufficient depth, they dug away, repeating the measure, off and on, until the man in the hole made the announcement that it was "deep enough."

Tom's inward tears now assumed the most painful condition, but he allowed no word or look to betray his emotions to his inhuman enemies.

The outlaws, having tightened the ropes around his legs and arms, lifted him in their arms and carried him to the pit, into which they lowered him, feet foremost. When his feet touched the bottom, his chin rested on the surface of the ground.

"Now, then," said one of the demons, "shovel in the dirt around the bulb."

This one of them began to do, while another, provided with a pick-handle, stamped the dirt down solid around their living victim. It required but a few minutes to fill the hole around the young ranger, leaving nothing but his head uncovered.

"Now, then, Sir Ranger," said one of the villains, "I think you are firmly planted, and will stay thar till we come again."

The trio now threw aside their tools, mounted their horses and rode away in pursuit of Christie.

And Idaho Tom again found himself alone, as firmly planted on the plain as though he had been rooted there. He could scarcely move a muscle, and he found breathing difficult, so tight was the earth around his body.

The light of the burning prairie was growing brighter around him, and the pungent odor of the burning grass filled the atmosphere.

The report of firearms came from the direction of the river, mingled with the din of battle and the surge of the night-wind.

With his ear pressed close against the earth, he could hear the thump and thunder of hooved feet upon it, and the roar and crackle of the advancing flame.

The young ranger could turn his head slightly to either side. He could see the white smoke, filled with millions of sparks, mounting into the gloom of heaven; and no difference which way he turned his eyes, he could see the horrible, ghastly faces of the three dead savages staring with stony eyes toward him.

Idaho Tom now experienced a sensation of fear that he had never felt before; and the pretty, sad face of Christie came up in his memory to mock his helplessness instead of cheering him. There was not the shadow of a chance for his escape from the terrible "prairie-stock" without the intervention of human aid. He was worse than buried alive. He was not only exposed to the attacks of the ravenous wolves howling in the distance, but to the seething prairie-fire sweeping down toward him before a strong wind. Death seemed inevitable within the same hour that life and love seemed so sweet and promising. His darling Christie was a fugitive upon the great, trackless plain, doomed almost to certain death or captivity, while he was suffering all the tortures of a living death.

More seriously than ever did the young man begin to think of the great Hereafter. His face grew pale, and in the red glare of the burning plain it looked ghastly. He closed his eyes and turned his face toward heaven. His lips moved in prayer—he prayed for Christie, his friends, himself—he prayed sincerely and with depth of holy reverence in his voice and soul.

Suddenly he was startled by a sound like feet running through the grass. He opened his eyes and glanced around—an icy shudder thrilled through his half-chilled form. He saw the blaze of the prairie fire leaping and lancing up over the crest of the hill not more than half a mile away, while, clearly outlined in its red glare, he beheld a huge, shaggy animal. It was not over twenty paces from him, and stood glaring toward him with blazing green eyes, dripping mouth and lolling tongue—its bushy tail moving slowly from side to side with the measured lashes of a panther's.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

MOMENTS OF EXCITEMENT.

A TERROR that almost stilled his heart, seized upon Idaho Tom. His eyes dilated, and his lips grew ashy white. Had he been free to act, he would have feared no living man or creature. It was the realization of his helpless condition that almost stupefied his sensibilities. His brain seemed set in a dizzy whirl, in which a hundred ogerish forms and menacing dangers passed to and fro—horrible visions of a wild, wakeful dream.

Suddenly a deep sound like the bay of a dog broke upon his ears like the sullen boom of thunder. It aroused him from the condition into which he had been thrown by the first sense of fear he had ever known.

He gazed wildly around him like one started from sleep.

The animal had turned its side toward him.

Tom saw that it was a huge Newfoundland dog.

The clatter of hoofs break suddenly upon the young ranger's ears.

A horseman in hood and cloak is seen approaching swiftly out of the north.

Close by the dog he draws rein, and then in a tone low, excited and decidedly feminine, he asks—addressing the dog:

"What is it, Major? What is it, good dog?"

"Bow-wow-wow," answered the dog, then he scampered toward Tom.

Tom's heart gave a great bound; he recognized the voice of the speaker. It was that of the lovely Aree, the Maid of the Mountains—the daughter of the robber-lieutenant.

She rode up and gazed down with distended eyes upon the

human head lying in the grass. The red light that now pervaded the night, showed her the white, handsome face of Idaho Tom, whose speechless silence seemed born of death.

Her first thought was that the head was there alone, and with a low moan of agony she leaped to the ground, and dropping upon her knees by the ghastly face, stooped and kissed the silent lips with a passionate fervor. But at the same instant she started back with a crimson flush mounting to her lovely face. She felt the warmth of life in Tom's lips—she felt them move—Tom lived.

"Aree, I am not quite dead," the unfortunate man said, in a weak, labored tone.

"Oh, Tom! Mr. Taylor, forgive my impertinent haste, for I believed you dead," she said, recovering her mental composure. "I see you are in the 'prairie stock,' and it needs no words to tell me who put you here. But I can save you—here is the spade with which your living grave was dug."

"Aree, you have surely been sent an especial agent of mercy to me—a guardian angel. Twice before have you delivered me from danger. In ten minutes more the prairie fire would have been licking my face."

Aree took up the spade, threw back her hood and cloak and went bravely to work shoveling the earth from about Tom's form.

She was possessed of remarkable physical strength for one of her delicate form, and wielded the spade with no little skill. In a few minutes she had sufficient dirt removed to enable her to liberate Tom's arms and hands; but owing to the long, painful confinement of these members, the young ranger found them still rendered helpless by cramp. But soon the circulation of the blood was restored and the use of his limbs regained, when without further difficulty he succeeded in effecting his escape from what he had looked upon, for a while, as a living grave.

So rapidly had the adventures and perils of the night crowded upon the young mountaineer that it seemed impossible that he should have any hope and strength left. But no sooner was he free again than all his activity of mind and body revived. He took Aree's hand and kissed it, and then in the most fervent words thanked her for the many noble acts of mercy she had bestowed upon him since he had ventured in the Black Hills.

She replied that it was a pleasure to serve him, that she had followed him and her own friends from the hills for that purpose, though she had not expected to find him there, and expressed a deep surprise over the fact.

In answer to her inquiry, Tom told her why he had left his friends upon the river bottom, and when he spoke of Christie, his meeting with her, and the sacrifice he had made that she might escape, he saw the maiden's dark eyes flash wildly, her lips curl slightly, and her beautiful, imperious face assume an expression strongly indicative of bitter disappointment and sore apprehension.

Tom regretted that he had spoken as he did of Christie, for he suddenly remembered that Kit had said Aree loved him—Tom—with all her heart. He saw that the old man's words were substantiated by the emotions that his words engendered in the breast of the girl. She had been such an angel of mercy to him that he would have done nothing in the world to injure her feelings, or wound the love that he now felt certain had actuated her in all her kindness toward him. As he had seen the beams of love in Christie's face a few minutes before, he could now see all the same in Aree's, rendered wild and passionate by the doubt and uncertainty of her emotions being reciprocated.

Tom really felt that he had escaped from one difficulty into another. He still had not only his enemies to deal with, but the wild love of a brave and desperate girl, in whose breast he knew, by her flashing black eyes, there slumbered a spirit that would brook no rivalry, no contempt, no false pretense.

Tom could not put her aside ruthlessly, for all that was beautiful, kind and generous in woman appealed directly to his gallantry and manhood, but just how to get around Aree's love without offending her, was a matter that now troubled him. He was under lasting obligations to her for her deeds of kindness; he admired her beauty, her courage, and her womanly modesty; but he did not love her—he could not love her. And yet, she stood there before him, refusing to withdraw her little hand from his, her eyes beaming with the soul of affection, her heart throbbing wildly and aching for one word that would allay the hunger of her starving, famishing love.

The near approach of the devouring flames, however, furnished Tom a good pretext for diverting the mind of the lovely maiden from the power that held her speechless and transfixed.

"Aree," he said, glancing uneasily toward the fire, "we must not tarry here longer. The flames are approaching us rapidly. Moreover, my enemies might see me free again and—"

"They dare not harm you now, Tom," she said, calmly; "my words have a power among the mountain men—none dare disobey my orders by an especial decree of their own, that is as binding on them as the oath that admits them to the brotherhood of mountain men. So no harm shall come to you from that source while you are with me. But there is danger of the fire—let us hurry away."

Together they walked away, Tom leading her pony and the dog walking close behind. They made their way south, then got in behind the range of the prairie-fire, where, assured of their safety, for the time being, Tom stopped and listened for some sound by which he might judge of the fate of his friends. But all was silent as the grave, save the roar and

crackle of the fire and the occasional scream of a bird driven from its grassy roost.

Aree sat down upon a long, white stone rising a foot or more above the earth. Tom sat down by her side.

"Well," he said, with some dejection, "I feel like a lost sheep driven from the flock by wolves."

Aree laughed softly.

"I know not whether my friends are living or dead," he continued. "I have neither horse nor weapon, and am without guide or compass."

"You are not without a friend, I assure you," Aree said.

"I am aware of that, Aree; and it is a kind, lovely, and fearless friend—one from whom I regret having to part; but I must soon be moving. Every moment is of great importance to me."

"When will we meet again, Tom?—ever?"

"I hope so, Aree, though I sincerely hope it will be under different circumstances than those under which we have heretofore met."

Tears moistened the eyes of the maiden, and her lips trembled with the words of love her woman's modesty prevented her from uttering.

Tom was fully cognizant of her feelings, and his own heart ached to see and know that he was the cause of her sadness and heart-troubles. But what could he do?

"Tom," she finally said, her feelings breaking beyond the barriers of self-restraint, "I wish I could go with you, I am so tired of this life among the hills. If I had never known better, then I could have no reason for complaint; but I have."

"Aree, I hope my coming into the hills has not been instrumental in making you unhappy, for I am unworthy the regards of—"

"Do not say that, Tom," she interrupted; "you know you are worthy the love of a robber's daughter. It is I who have scarcely dared to hope that my love might be reciprocated."

"You are jesting Aree," Tom said, in hopes of gradually dismissing the subject.

"I speak the solemn truth, Tom, when I say I love you, immodest and unwomanly as you may deem the avowal."

"After we have parted, you will soon forget me, Aree."

"No, I will never forget you, Tom; and oh! do not turn from me without giving me one word to cheer me on my way back to my mountain home."

"Aree, my feelings for you must always be of the most pure and exalted character. I shall ever hold you in grateful remembrance for your kindness."

"Tom, is that all you can ever be to me?"

"Is not that enough?"

"Then you love another," she said, bitterly.

Tom was silent.

Aree's heart fluttered wildly.

The dog at their feet started up with alarm. The clatter of hoofs broke suddenly upon their ears.

Three mounted men with a led horse appeared in sight on the plain.

"They are the men that put me into that pit!" said Tom, excitedly; "I must flee for my life, Aree."

"Stay! fear not," she said, laying her hand upon his arm; "they dare not harm you if I bid them not."

The three men soon came up from their fruitless attempt to capture Christie, having the rangers' pack-horse still in their possession.

As they drew rein before Idaho Tom and his fair companion, a cry of surprise burst from their lips.

"Oh-ho!" one of them exclaimed, "there is the Princess Aree, as I am born, and she has oncaged our young bird, true as that's a—"

"Villains!—inhuman wretches!" cried the girl, her eyes flashing with a fire of indignation, "do not attempt to offer this man harm, or I will shoot you down like a pack of dogs."

She drew a silver-mounted revolver and cocked it. The outlaws knew her—they knew she would not hesitate a moment to execute her threat, and they feared her as they loved her. Aree was the pet and idol of the band, and held a greater power, in one sense of the word, over the men than Prairie Paul himself. There was not one in the band who would not, like the gallant knights of old, have risked his life for the beautiful Aree—to gain her love and smiles. Her mandates were imperative, nor were they obeyed with any spirit of timid servility and humiliation, for their devotion to her was the better nature of rude and wicked men paying homage at the shrine of woman's beauty.

"It is just as our fairy queen says," said the spokesman of the trio; "her words are law; yet it is a shame to let the murderer of our friends go unpunished."

"You provoked your friends' death," answered Aree, "therefore I bid you restore to this man every thing you robbed him of."

"So be it," replied the robbers, though there was a look of significance that passed between them that escaped Aree's notice. They returned Tom's pistols, his sheath-knife, gold watch, trumpet and silver spurs.

"There; that's all, I believe," said one of the men.

"No, it is not," replied Tom; "you still retain an article of great value to me."

"Oh, yes!" exclaimed an outlaw, with affected surprise; "it's the picter; but I want Miss Aree to see it fust. Just look at it, Princess, and if you don't say it's the face of an angel, why, then I'll give up."

Aree took the picture and looked at the face. It was a pretty, young face—the face of Christie Dorne.

Aree's face grew white and red by turns, and snapping the picture-case together with a nervous start, she turned, and handing it to Tom, asked, with a tinge of bitterness in her voice:

"Tom, what is she to you?"

"All that a lovely woman could possibly be," answered the young ranger.

With an imperative wave of the hand, Aree ordered the three outlaws away, she retaining the pack animal for Tom. When they were beyond hearing, she again turned to her companion and said:

"Tom, I suppose, then, I have saved your life for another, yet you are virtually in my power. Were I Prairie Paul and you a woman, do you suppose I would let you go unharmed? No; I would make you my wife against your most bitter protestations. That is the difference between man and woman with the same physical power. For long weeks has Prairie Paul been plotting and planning for the capture of a young girl of Mennovalle settlement. He loves her, and if he once gets her into his power, he will make her his wife whether she loves or hates him. That is outlaw life and love among the men; but not so with the women. A woman's love is all tenderness and devotion, a man's selfishness and passion. I shall now go back to my mountain home with my bleeding heart, but feeling no ill-will toward you, Tom, nor envy of her whom you love. But no longer will I have the courage, the strength and motive, save through a Christian duty, to follow you, to watch over and protect you from the vengeance of Prairie Paul and his followers. Here we must part, no doubt forever; and may Heaven guide and protect you henceforth, Tom."

Tears stood in her eyes and her lips trembled, yet her face wore a look of imperious fortitude and composure. Tom sympathized with her from the very depths of his heart. He knew how she must be suffering, for he knew how his own boy's heart had been wrung, to what seemed the utmost of human endurance, that memorable morning that he turned his back upon Lake Tahoe for the last time.

He lifted her little hand to his lips and kissed it, then he assisted her to mount her pony and bade her farewell.

She turned and rode northward, while Tom, mounting the pack-animal, rode away in the opposite direction—she disappearing in the gloom of the distance—he emerging from the twilight shadows into the glow of the prairie fire.

The thoughts of each were never busier, never more painful: she was thinking of blasted hopes and trying to still her aching, throbbing heart; while he was thinking of both the mountain fairy and Christie Dorne, and suffering all the pangs of the severest persecution his heart and manhood had ever sustained.

In the midst of his mental turmoil, his horse suddenly pricked up its ears and sniffed the air with alarm.

He glanced back over his shoulder, and, to his surprise and horror, beheld the three outlaws, in whose power he had been so recently, in swift pursuit of him.

What did it mean? Had Aree's love turned to hatred and vengeance, and sent those slaves of her will in pursuit of him?

These were the questions that now rose in the mind of the young ranger, but he had no time to lose in speculation over them, for the robbers were close behind, and a wall of prairie fire outstretched before. But without bending his course in the least, he bore straight ahead toward the fire, and the next moment was lost from view of his pursuers in the red, roaring flame and blinding smoke.

CHAPTER XXIX.

ROBBING PAUL.

To return to those whom we left surrounded by fire and enemies on the river-bottom is to attempt the description of a scene to which our pen is inadequate to do justice. The fire was lighted at the signal of the horn in an almost continuous semicircle. The grass being dry and the wind drawing down the valley with considerable force, the flames spread rapidly and shot into the air as if possessed of life, twisting and writhing—now bellying to the wind like a crowded sail—now shooting and gliding close along the earth, then rising again in majestic and awful grandeur into the purple dome of darkness. And, too, the noise was terrific. The hissing, crackling and roaring of the flames, commingled, sounded like the rush of a tornado through the forest.

But to Dakota Dan, Kit Bandy and the young rangers the sight and sound were nothing new. Only the presence of the moving figures, just visible in the red glare of the fire, out upon the plain, gave them uneasiness; for they had the choice of but two avenues of escape: to ride through the fire, or the enemies' lines. Neither was inviting, nor offered advantage over the other.

"Boy," said Dakota Dan, "we've got to hussel out and meet the foe or fire. My suggestion, howsumever, is to fire the grass right here and let it drive the enemy before it, as their fire 'll drive us."

"That's very good advice, ole man," assented Kit Bandy; "but, then, I don't see why it should make great difference to you if ye rid through the fire. You ort to be gittin' a little used to it, Dan'l; then it won't go so hard with you when you make yer grand entry below. But then that is the dingdest, dangdest ole roarer of a fire I ever clapped my optics onto."

"Shall we fire the grass, Dan?" asked Darcy Cooper.

"Yas," replied Dan, "let it blizzer."

They at once fired the grass in a score of places, then mounting their horses held themselves in readiness for any emergency. Kit Bandy was furnished with the only odd horse in the band. The fire last started was soon under headway, and, when it had burned over a few rods, the rangers rode in upon its trail and followed it up close as the heat would permit.

They were now surrounded entirely by the walls of fire, but while one side was approaching the other was receding. All within the circle was light as noonday, though each face and form looked weird and gray in the sickly, garish light. All beyond the fire was black as oblivion.

To the surprise and fear of our friends, however, they soon discovered that the wall of flame behind them served as a partial wind-screen to that before. The result was that the former gained rapidly upon the latter, endangering the rangers' situation. They had entertained hopes of being far enough in on the trail of their own fire, to be out of danger before the other came up close enough to reach them; for, of course, the rear fire could only advance to where the other started.

Pressing as close, however, as the heat would permit, to the advance wall, they watched closely for a chance to dash through.

The wind surged up; the flames, like great dragon-tongues, swept down after them, reaching out parallel with the earth's surface more than a hundred feet—hissing and crackling as though possessed of a devilish spite, and eager to sting the besieged to death with their fire-envenomed shafts.

The clothing of the rangers began to smoke, and their flesh to smart with the terrible heat. Breathing became difficult, and the smoke, sailing over, blinded and bewildered them. Their horses began to rear and plunge with affright. The awful sounds of suffocating men and animals rose from out the midst of the flame. Death seemed inevitable; but at the last moment the flame behind the rangers was extinguished as suddenly as though the hand of God had swept it from existence. It had reached the trail of the other fire and died out.

A strong gust of wind carried the last of the smoke and heat over our friends, who were already reeling in their saddles. But now the cool, fresh air revived them. In a moment they were themselves again.

"Horn of Joshua!" exclaimed old Kit between fits of coughing and sneezing; "if that wer'n't—atchew!—a leetle the strongest scent I ever—atchew!—had of the brimstone regions. Confound the confounded, con—atchew!"

"Away, boys! away!" suddenly shouted old Dan; "the varmints are comin' round the circle. Into it, Patience, old gal! Let's strike fur the river, boys."

The enemy had massed nearly the whole of their forces on the south side, not anticipating this maneuver of the rangers; and when the latter turned northward they found but a few warriors scattered along the plain to oppose their flight. A few random shots were exchanged, but without any visible effect on either side.

Our friends bore directly toward the river, whose shore they soon reached. They found the bank nearly ten feet high—the current strong and swift. But there was no other avenue of escape open to them, and, speaking a word to his mare, Dakota Dan and his noble beast shot from the bank into the river with a thunderous splash. Both horse and rider sunk from view under the waves, but soon appeared again and struck out for the opposite shore.

One after another the rangers followed his example, and soon the river was lashed into a foam by plunging horses. All effected a safe landing on the opposite shore, where the bank was low and firm, and, besides the river, they had put several rods between themselves and the enemy, ere the latter had reached the opposite shore.

"Safe! Safe! by all that's good!" exclaimed old Dan, as they rode into the gloom beyond the radius of light.

"Yes, and wet, wet, by all that's bad!" returned Kit Bandy, with an air of disgust. "Confound this kentry, it's the dingdest, dangdest place I was ever in. Right out of one trouble into another—no sooner war we out of the devil's own fire than we war right into the Styx itself; and now here we go, feelin' wetter and glummier than a duck tangled in an alligator's maw."

"Friend Kit," said Dan, gravely, "you alers look on the dark side of everything; yer lamentations are longer'n the moral law. Now, here's the Triangle, that's me, Humility, my dorg thar, and Patience, my mare here, what takes the bitter with the sweet. We've grown old on the peraro, extarminatin' red-skins, killin' b'ars and buffalo, and never find fault if we git the wu'st of a bargain. No, sir; meekness, humility and patience are the component parts of the Triangle."

"Great horn of Joshua! I'd like to know what I've been doin' all these fifty-odd years," replied Kit. "Why, man, I'll bet I kin show a record fuller of crooks, ups and downs, roughs and tumbles, than any man that ever hopped on creation or dodged a broomstick in the hands of an exasperated feminine woman. Dan'l, war you ever married? Did you ever taste the sweets of domestic conjugality?"

"Wa—al, no; I don't remember as I did."

"Lord, man! you'd not 'a' forgot it if you had. I've been thar, Dan'l, I've been thar; and the little differences atwixt me and my ducksy, Sabina Ann, war indelibly impressed on my mind with the skillet, rollin'-pin, tater-smasher or what-

ever war handiest to her paws at the time her angelic temper took a summersault."

Satisfied they were now beyond danger of pursuing enemies, the rangers took a lively interest in the colloquy of the two old bordermen. As they had not expected to meet with Idaho Tom again during the night, they entertained no uneasiness regarding his fate, although they knew he was exposed to dangers.

Dakota Dan took the lead, gradually bending their course northward in hopes of finding the camp of Major Loomis. He was satisfied that the major's party must be off in that direction, unless it had fallen a prey to the ruthless vandals who had been constantly scouring the plain for the last three days and nights.

After two hours' hard riding, the party struck a little clump of pine brushwood in which they halted with the intention of encamping there for the night. By means of matches, that had escaped being rendered useless by the plunge into the river, a fire was lighted. The rangers had no fears of its light publishing abroad their location; for they were surrounded by high bluffs, and overshadowed by a clump of scrubby pines. Under this friendly arbor, before a roaring fire, the party disposed themselves in various positions, all engaged in the duty of drying their clothes and putting their weapons in a condition for immediate use.

The horses had been picketed near to crop the grass, which, under the sheltering pines, had, so far, escaped the autumn frosts. The guards were posted at various points around the camp, although Dan would have felt perfectly secure in trusting the safety of their bivouac to the keen instinct of his dog, Humility.

Kit Bandy's tongue ran incessantly, and between him and Dan, the rangers' spirits were revived by continual outbursts of merriment.

"Dinged if this ar'n't the wu'st night I ever experienced since I quit housekeepin'," Kit remarked, as he changed his position in order to dry the other side of his smoking garments; "the time ole Sabina rolled me into the crick sowed up in a blanket war a real lively affair, but then thar war'n't so cussed much reality in it, as thar war in this; for then it was warm weather, and to-night's somewhat chilly."

"I thought different thar at one time when the fire war about to bounce us," said Dakota Dan.

"That war a frisky time, Dan'l; but, old man, you don't know anything 'bout hot fires. You'd ort to 'a' married in order to have seen fire—real, hiss'n', hot fire. Many's the time that I've had a tea-kettle of b'ilin' water poured down my back by that old hashint of a Sabina; and haydoogins of times hev I, Christofer Bandy, had a shovel full of hot coals and ashes dabb'd into my mouth. Horn of Joshua! then you'd ort to 'a' see'd me spit fire and vomit hot ashes like a walkin' Vasuvius—and that old Sabe was the cause of it all."

"I'm afeard, Kit Bandy," said Dan, "that you do the memory of yer dead wife injustice."

"Dead!" exclaimed Kit, in apparent astonishment; "dead, did ye say, ole man? Oh, ho! ho! ho! Why, man, that woman's livin', well as ever she war in her life; and the last time I hear of her she war bein' courted by a youth of twenty down in San Joaquin. Dead! you must be crazy, man. A California woman of the old type never dies—never, Dan'l. It's yer little frail things, born within the last century, that dies afore they're fifty. I'll never, never forgit the time that poor little Maggie Sailor died down at Black Bill's Gulch," and Kit's voice grew deep with emotion. "She could sing like an angel, and many's the time she'd been heard prayin' in secret—act'ly prayin' for the Lord to bless the wicked, hard-hearted miners. We old hardened sinners used to alers feel freer and purer arter we'd even looked on that gal. She war a power in the gulch, I tell ye. All the gold thar couldn't 'a' had the influence over the men that that very Maggie Sailor had. But one day she sickened and died; and then, boys, thar war sadness in that gulch. Men that never knowed what grief was broke right down and blubbered like school-boys. Tcm Benson came to me and says he, 'Kit, Maggie's gone!' 'Gone where?' axed I. 'To heaven,' says he; 'she's dead!' I never felt so awful in my life. I thought I war goin' to choke. I loosened my collar and rubbed the mist off my eyes. I left the mine and went home, and fixed up, and went up to the Sailors' house. I told 'em I wanted to see Maggie, and they took me into the room whar she war laid out in a rough pine box. And it war then, boys, that I thought I'd a glimpse into heaven. I felt queer—as though I war floatin' in the air; I wanted to bawl right out. Only the rude box told me that I warn't lookin' afar off through a winder of heaven upon an angel. Poor little thing!" and the rough old borderman brushed the mist from his eyes, "she laid thar with her lily hands folded across her pulseless breast; her big, soft, brown eyes closed; her white teeth just showin' through her lips, and her golden hair curlin' and nestlin' so fond-like around her marble-white brow."

"One by one the miners came stealin' shyly up to the Sailor cabin to git a look at the faded flower. Men that hadn't washed their faces, nor shaved for years, come thar, clean and orderly, with a tremor on their lips. And it was really amusin', though sad, to see some of 'em—great, big fellers that was never known to conceal a pistol nor a wicked thought—come up thar with a tiny little posy, or a sprig of evergreen hid somewhar about 'em, and when they thought no one war looking, they'd tuck it into her hair or fasten it on her coffin. The next day came the funeral, and every man in the gulch followed poor Maggie to her grave, and as

we looked on her face for the last time, a great sob burst from every breast. Mebbby, boys, you think I'm jokin', but it's a serious fact."

The rangers did not dispute him. The mist in his eyes and the tremor in his voice, not only verified his words, but proved that he had a heart, rough as the exterior man was, susceptible of the tenderest of human passions.

A few minutes of silence followed the conclusion of his story; then each of the rangers wrapped his blanket around him, and lay down to rest, his mind seriously impressed by Kit's words, which were spoken with a pathos that appealed directly to the better nature of each.

CHAPTER XXX.

IN THE HUNTERS' CAMP.

THE night passed quietly away, and the sun arose in a soft, hazy sky. The birds in the little clump of pines twittered and sung in glee. The rangers were astir early, making their meal on a number of prairie hens killed by Dan and Kit, and served up by the cook of the party in good style.

After breakfast the horses were brought in, saddled and bridled, and in a few minutes more the band was in motion.

The few hours' rest had infused much of the wonted vigor into the rangers' bodies and spirits. The Triangle was livelier than common, and Kit Bandy seemed unusually exuberant and jolly.

Across the plain in the bracing air of the rosy morn, the little band galloped along, keeping their course directly north. The keen eye of Dakota Dan, as well as that of Kit Bandy, allowed nothing to pass unseen; and suddenly an exclamation burst from the lips of the former as he drew rein.

"A wagon track!" he said, dismounting, "and now, I dare say, it is the trail of Major Loomis' party!"

He knelt down in the grass and searched for the imprint of the horses' hoofs in the earth.

"Ah—ha!" he finally exclaimed, "I have got it—they're p'inted north and wearin' shoes with eight nails each, and heel and toe corks. This's the major's trail."

"How old, friend Dan'l, would you say it are?" asked Kit. "Bout two days old. I'd think it war made the day behind yesterday."

"Then, by ambling along right peartly, we may overhaul 'em some place this side of the north pole."

Dan remounted his mare, and the party moved on. An unbroken expanse of undulating prairie lay before them. The horizon alone was its limit, and a long, tiresome ride lay before our friends.

Idaho Tom became the subject of conversation now. His young friends expressed the greatest fears for his safety.

"There is no doubt in my mind," said Darcy Cooper, "but that Tom knows something of that girl of whom you spoke, Kit."

"I bee-lieve you, Darcy," said Bandy; "I thought I could see the impetuosity of a boy in love when I told him the gal's name. The way he rushed off convinced me of my first conviction. And, what's more, that I never told before, the gal herself like to went into hysterics of joy and fear, when I told her Idaho Tom an' a party of friends were surrounded on the bottom. Oh, you can't fool me on love, boys; I've been thar to my heart's content, and can show more scars of skilletts, billets and sich—the result of my first love—than any other man that ever hopped at the sound of his wife's voice. Great horn that blew down old Jericho! if any man would 'a' dared told me before I married her, that Sabina would snatch me bald afore the honeymoon was over, I'd put up a job for the undertaker. I sw'ar, she was the dingdest, dangdest, lovin'est critter that ever wore red hair afore we wedlocked; but after that, it war rouse, ye Romans."

"Love is a quar thing, ain't it?" said old Dakota Dan. "I had a little tech of it onct, but rekivered without any fatal attack. But, ha'n't I seed a few cases of it since? Hav'n't I, Patience, my mare here, and Humility, my dorg thar, helped a few lovyers out'n deefickilties? Rather think we hev! The hardest and technist case that I ever seed, though, war down at Albuquerque. A gay and gaudy young chap came in thar once from the States, and went to dashin' around like all git out 'mong the senoritas, just smashin' hearts all to darnation. He seemed to be sweetest on one Anita Rappalola, or some sich a name. She war the most skrimptious little Mexican gal I ever set eyes on. Her form war like that of a fairy—her face like that of the princess of beauty. Her big black eyes, in which slumbered the soul of love, were soft and lustrous. Her nose war perfection—her lips just as luscious as a baby's. The most roguish and tempting little dimples lurked in her cheeks and chin. And her hands—they were the plumpest, tiniest little things you ever saw. Anybody would have loved her for her beauty, and shy, timid, and childlike nature. Her father war a rich old don, and she war the only child; so, in course, Captain Augustus Caesar Kane set his cap for her and her legacy. He paid his respects to her for a long time and finally it war rumored that they war to wed; but by-and-by the old man failed in bisness and he'd nothin' left for the captain but Anita. But this took the biggest slice of the gallant Kane's heart, and he finally went down and informed his adored little Anita that it would be impossible for a man in his station to wed the child of a penniless father—that they'd have to postpone the wedding for a while, at least."

"The onery scamp!—to go back on sich a little angel," said Kit, with contempt.

"Of course, you can imagine her feelings, can't you? You can imagine that on bended knee and with tears in her lovely eyes, she begged her beloved Americano not to desert her, can't you? You can imagine the sobs and heartbreakin' appeals of the poor little pleadin' angel, can't you? You can imagine how her little hands were clasped over her bosom to still her throbbin', achin' heart, can't you?"

"Yes, yes!" replied Kit, "and my heart bleeds for her poor thing."

"Then just stanch the blood; don't shed another drop. for Anita didn't do any sich things as you imagine. No, sir-ee! She just put her plump little hand into her throbbing bosom; yanked out a tiny little pistol, and put a chunk of lead through her beloved Americano's system; and then, with royal dignity, waltzed away and smiled sweetly on Colonel Ret Gershona. That's what my little fairy did."

The rangers burst into a peal of laughter in which Kit Bandy joined with a hearty good cheer.

"Score one for Dan'l!" exclaimed the old ex-robber; "I expected to hear of his Anita dying of a broken heart and bein' wafted to the land of the blest. But, no; come to think, the average Mexican senorita is ekal to the California weemin of the old type."

Thus conversing, the party rode on, and as the sun neared the noon-tide meridian, they halted for one hour to allow their animals a respite and to crop the dry grass.

They feasted their own hunger on the remnants of their morning repast, then resumed their journey.

It was near the middle of the afternoon when they came in sight of two white-topped wagons standing in the edge of a little grove some two miles in advance. That they were the wagons of Major Loomis, they had not a single doubt. They could see horses, and now and then persons near the wagons moving about.

Riding forward they approached the grove. A man on horseback came out to meet them.

He was a young man—in fact, had it not been for the heavy mustache that shaded his mouth, one would have taken him for a youth of sixteen. His eyes were black and searching; his hair was of a very dark color, and hung over his shoulders in long, wavy locks. His form was lithe and graceful, his hands small, and his features of an effeminate cast. His skin was almost as brown as an Indian's.

He was dressed in a suit that seemed entirely original, as if dictated by his own fancy and taste. He carried a brace of revolvers and a hunting-knife, and bestrode a fiery little mustang, caparisoned with a Mexican saddle and bridle.

Kit Bandy recognized the pony and saddle the moment he saw them. They had formerly belonged to Prairie Paul's band. But the rider was an entire stranger to them all.

"Gentlemen, I hail you as friends," said the young ranger, for such he evidently was.

"That's fair enough," replied Dan, "and arter you tell us somethin' of yerself and yer backin', mebbby we'll do the same."

"I, sir," the youth said, in a rather pleasant tone, "am Antelope Arth, or in other words, Arthur Clayton. I presume it is not necessary to give you a full history of my career; though I will say, incidentally, that I have, for the past year, been a bearer of dispatches between the forts on the upper Missouri, and have given sufficient guarantee of the same to Major Loomis and party, who are encamped in the grove, and who sent me out here to meet and conduct you to camp."

"That's bisness," replied Dan; "so we're ready to follow you right in."

Antelope Arth wheeled his pony and as they rode toward the camp Kit Bandy said:

"Youngster, 'pears to me you've been doin' some hoss-stealin', else I'm orfully fooled."

The young man laughed in a low, soft tone, then replied:

"You may know this pony, or even own him, for all I know; I found him running on the plain yesterday, saddled and bridled; and as my horse was about exhausted, I was induced to make an exchange."

"Wal, I reckon that's fair, long as ye made the trade with yerself."

At this juncture they reached the edge of the grove, where they were met by Major Loomis and a man named Herbert Dorne.

"By gracious!" exclaimed the bluff old major, advancing toward Dakota Dan, "if here isn't that old fellow whose deadly shot saved my daughter at Lone Tree Grove. Old hero, give us your hand and your name, and receive my eternal thanks!"

"Yes, and by the living wonders! here's an old friend of mine," cried Dorne, advancing toward Kit Bandy. "Kit Bandy, how do you do? Git down and give me your paw."

"Horn of Joshua!" exclaimed Kit, throwing his long leg over the horse's neck and sliding to the ground; "if it ar'n't my friend Dorne, I'll—shake! confound it, man, you're the last critter I ever expected to stumble across over here! When did ye leave Carson City and old Nevada?"

"Over a year ago; I am now living at the Mennonite Settlement, on the Niobrara."

"The deuce you are! Wal, wal, if this don't beat me stone-blind."

"I knew you were in the neighborhood, Kit."

"Did?—how?"

"My sister, Christie, told me."

"Christie—Christie Dorne?" exclaimed the old borderman

as a thought suddenly struck his mind, "not that gal that—" "Was with you on the plain last night. She was my sister, Kit," answered Herbert Dorne.

"By the ram's horn that sprawled old Jericho! What a dinged old fool I war! Why, I thought of you, Herbert, when she told me her name was Dorne, but I made no further inquiry, because I supposed you were on t'other side of the mountain; and then I never knowed you had a sister. But hen she is safe, eh?"

"Yes; in camp here. To our surprise she rode in this morning, nearer dead than alive. She has been quite ill all day, and is now confined to her couch. I think, however, she will recover with care and quietude. Excitement, fear and exposure have well nigh killed her."

"Poor young thing! I've worried a deal 'bout her. But what did she say 'bout Idaho Tom?"

"Who?" exclaimed Dorne, starting as though a clap of thunder had burst over him.

"Idaho Tom; but, Herbert, what's the matter?"

"My Lord!" responded Dorne, fiercely, "is that young vagabond of an Idaho Tom in this country?"

"He war, last night. Them's his men goin' into camp thar with Dan'l, and that old gentleman."

Dorne's face grew white with rage, and a look of disappointment settled upon it.

"Curse the luck!" he said. "I left Nevada to get Christie away from that young scape-gallows! She loved him, Kit, and I was afraid their love would terminate in marriage. I didn't want to see my only sister wedded to an outlaw and a gambler, as Idaho Tom was reputed to be."

"He 'peared like a brave, noble feller, Dorne; and, Lord! when I told him that I'd left a gal named Christie Dorne at a certain place, you'd ort to see him light out in the very face of death to find her."

"Then the young villain has met her; but where can he be?"

"Didn't she say anything 'bout him?"

"No; she only said that a young ranger had given her his horse upon which to escape. She knows my dislike of that Idaho Tom, hence her silence in regard to him."

"Well, well; this is rather a bad thing all around, then, but I hope all will turn out fur the best."

"It will turn out for the worst if that young outlaw comes sneaking around after Christie," said Herbert, fiercely.

"Be keerful, Herbert, not to say anything before his men that'll give offense, for they're young wild-cats on the fight—sooner do it than eat. I've see'd 'em tried; they're all grit and backbone, and can put a bullet right thar every time."

"I shall not offend them, though I dare say they're no better than their leader—a set of young scoundrels."

Dorne's temper gradually recovered its equanimity, when he changed the subject, and asked:

"Where have you been keeping yourself, Kit, the last year?"

"Bin up here in the hills tryin' robber-life, but—"

"Robber-life?" exclaimed Dorne, in surprise.

"Yes, but it didn't pay—couldn't rob anybody, and so when the boys came along, I arranged affairs and went away with 'em, thinkin' I'd try sumthin' else."

"Well, I am really glad to meet you; you are quite as welcome a visitor at our camp as is the renowned old ranger, Dakota Dan. We left the settlement about two weeks ago, and came up here to hunt buffalo and deer, and as the weather was warm and pleasant, and not the least danger in the world apprehended, some of our party brought their women along, as they have done heretofore. I wanted Christie to go, but she declined, and you can well imagine my surprise when she rode into our camp this morning and told me what had happened. We knew there was a party of outlaw Indians and robbers abroad, for Major Loomis' daughter was captured on the way here; but we never supposed they would extend their depredations as far as the settlement. They probably knew we were away, however, and took advantage of our absence. We would have started on our return home, soon after Christie came in, but three of our men are off north after elk, and will not be in for two or three days. We sent a messenger, however, back home with the news of Christie's safety. Since morning we have received quite an addition to our force, and if those demons of the prairie want any thing, let them call down this way now."

"I believe you saw Antelope Arth, the young dispatch-bearer, did you not? He's off duty a few months, and in going south struck us here; and we have prevailed on him to remain with us till we go back, which will be in a very few days. He seems to be thoroughly acquainted with this country, and for that reason we wanted him as a scout. But come, Kit—Squire Kit, it used to be in Carson, come to think—let's go up to camp." And turning, they moved away toward the camp, whither the rest had all preceded them.

CHAPTER XXXI.

SQUIRE BANDY'S STORY OF THE BLUE LEDGE MINE.

WHEN Kit and Dorne reached camp, they found the rangers had all dismounted, hitched their animals near, and were seated about in groups, talking to the hunters.

Dakota Dan was being entertained at the tent of Major

Loomis, by the bright-eyed little Amy, whose life had been saved at Lone Tree Grove by the remarkable skill of the old ranger.

The camp was located in the center of the grove, but a short distance from a little creek. A dozen white tents were pitched near together, and on the north and east of these six covered wagons were drawn up, "tongue and tail," forming a kind of a barricade.

There were eight or ten men in the party, and also six women, three of whom were the wives of three of the men present. One of the young ladies was Christie Dorne. Her sad, worn face contrasted strongly with the rosy cheeks and sparkling eyes of her young companions; and as Kit Bandy advanced toward her, all the color seemed to fade from her face. Kit noticed it, and said, in his usual familiar way:

"Hope you're not scart at me, Christie."

"Not at all, Mr. Bandy," she replied, remembering his name; "but I am surprised to see you here."

"No doubt of it; and I'm surprised, too; but awful glad to see you. The Lord only knows how I've suffered 'bout you since last night. But whar's Tom?"

Christie started uneasily, and glanced toward her brother Herbert, who was standing a few paces away, engaged in conversation with Darcy Cooper.

"Do not speak of Idaho Tom to brother," she said, lifting her brown eyes in a pleading manner to his.

"Your request comes too late, little one."

"You told him?" she said, with a look of deep regret.

"Yes, told him all the particulars, and he told me of your love and of his dislike."

Christie blushed, for at this moment she caught the flash of Antelope Arth's eye that was fixed upon her with a strange look. The young ranger was leaning against a tree, not over ten feet from them, and although he assumed a position of careless indifference, she felt certain that he was listening attentively to the old man's words, and seemed visibly affected by them.

It was quite a relief to her when Kit was called aside, and she was permitted to resume her couch. Had he brought some good news from her lover, it would have afforded her great relief; but nothing save bitter disappointment met her eager hopes. And, to add to her heart's troubles, she dare not approach her brother in Tom's behalf. For all she knew, Tom might be dying for want of some friendly hand to aid and assist him, and she finally resolved to tell Kit, at the first chance, of her suffering.

It was some time before Bandy came near the tent, but when he did, she called him to her and in a few words as possible told her troubles, and requested him to tell Tom's men. Before Kit left her, she noticed that Antelope Arth was again near them, evidently listening to their conversation.

What the young ranger meant by this she could not tell, unless he had become enamored of her. He had been introduced to her. He had conversed with her off and on during the day, and proved himself very agreeable and entertaining, never wanting for something to say.

As the day advanced, Christie recovered much of her wonted strength, and toward evening she was permitted to sit up awhile. Her brother, accompanied by Mr. Adam Farwell, entered the tent and sat down, and engaged in conversation. Christie was rather an unappreciative auditor, but the subject was finally changed so that she was drawn into the discussion. Then her brother rose and went out, leaving Christie and Farwell alone.

The latter was a man of some thirty years, rather handsome and prepossessing. He was pleasant appearing and agreeable, with a free, outspoken air about him that did not fail to win confidence.

Mr. Farwell was a wealthy cattle-dealer who had been herding a large number of cattle on the plains near the Menonite settlement that summer. He had become acquainted with Christie, and it was his great desire to pay his respects to her; but for some reason or other, he could never get her interested in himself beyond mere friendship, notwithstanding the favor of her brother to his attentions.

Christie's heart was set upon one object, and from this nothing could turn it. All the wealth of Adam Farwell, and all the protestations of her brother, could not destroy her love for Idaho Tom; still, she treated Farwell's attentions kindly, ladylike. She did this as much out of respect for her brother as out of her own good sense of womanly propriety. The love of Farwell blinded him, and he finally believed that he was making an impression on her heart. He could not discriminate between love and the friendship of a kind and loving nature, as was hers.

When alone, he said to her:

"Christie, I am really grieved to see you looking so sad and worn."

"I am sad, Adam," she replied, kindly, and without the least conventionality in her address; "few know what I have suffered since I was carried away from home, and what I am suffering still."

"And why are you suffering now?" he asked; "are you not safe and among friends?"

"Yes," answered Christie.

"Then your pain must be physical."

"No, it is mental pain, with a distressed heart."

"Ah, Christie! then you are troubled about him whose horse you rode hither into camp."

Christie started and fixed her eyes upon Farwell with a look of surprise; but, recovering her composure, she said:

"And why not, since he risked his life to save mine?"

"That was but a duty incumbent upon his manhood. But, Christie, you love that ranger."

"Brother Herbert has been telling you of him," she said, evasively, and yet with a tinge of bitterness in her tone.

"I know you highly regard Idaho Tom, but if he is the character represented to me, he is unworthy of your love."

"He has manhood," she answered, with a little asperity in her tone.

"No doubt of it," Farwell argued, "but so has the notorious Prairie Paul, the Pirate of the Gold Hills. Idaho Tom, I am told, was once known as the Young Outlaw of Silverland."

"I know he was," answered Christie, "but then that did not make him an outlaw. You know, Mr. Farwell, that odd names are characteristic of Western phraseology."

"Certainly, and sometimes they are fitly bestowed, for we have very odd characters in the West. But, Christie, I have known of your regards for that man some time; and yet I have lived in hopes of some day winning your love; can I still live on in that hope with any assurance of success?"

"You can not, Adam," she answered.

Farwell sighed, and leaning his head upon his hand, became silent and thoughtful.

Suddenly the sound of voices and hurrying feet outside aroused him; and rising, he went out, much to Christie's joyful relief.

A lively commotion prevailed among the men. Rifles and revolvers were glinting in the light as they were being brought into readiness for instant use.

"What is the trouble?" asked the unfortunate lover of the first man he met.

"One of the guards reports the approach of enemies upon the plain, while another has discovered skulking forms already in the grove. An attack is feared by Dakota Dan."

Kit Bandy and Dakota Dan and his dog went out to reconnoiter the grove. They separated on one side, and creeping in opposite directions around the margin of the molte, met on the opposite side.

"Find or see anything, Dan?" asked old Kit, in a subdued tone.

"Harkee! d'ye hear that?" answered Dan.

The sound of horse's hoofs beating the plain came faintly to their ears, though it grew plainer and plainer each moment.

The night was not so very dark on the prairie. The sky was clear and the stars shone forth.

The sound of the flying hoofs came nearer, and louder and louder it swelled out upon the air. Then from out the distant gloom into the dim starlight the form of a riderless horse unfolds itself from the shadows.

The old scouts start back—Humility barks. Down past them, not twenty feet from where they stood, sweeps the horse—on into the shadows of the distance.

A cry of horror burst involuntarily from the men's lips at the sight they beheld.

Around the neck of the terrified horse was the end of a long rope that dragged on the earth thirty feet behind; and attached to this dragging end was a human body that thumped and bounded over the rough ground as it was torn along at a fearful speed.

Away into the night—beyond the reach of human ears—sped the beast, frightened at the horrible ball of quivering flesh that it dragged behind it.

For a moment Kit Bandy and old Dan stood aghast. Humility bounded away in pursuit of the horse, uttering an almost human wail. But he soon came back.

"Kit Bandy, in Heaven's name, what did ye see?" asked Dan.

"A frightened horse dragging behind a human form," answered Kit. "Some poor devil has laid down on the prairie to sleep, and tied his horse's lariat to his body, and the horse getting frightened has snatched him into eternity. I've see'd sich things afore, but men will be fools."

"Kit, the question just occurred to me: what if it should turn out to be the body of Idaho Tom?"

"It would kill that little Christie dead, dead. You must keep it still from all, that it may not get to her ears, or she'll worry herself to death."

The two men returned to camp and reported the grove clear of all danger.

This news was a wonderful relief to all, and the camp once more settled back into its old position of ease and repose.

Adam Farwell returned to Christie's presence and said:

"Christie, was the answer you gave me a while ago final?"

"It was," she replied.

"But if you should learn to love me, could you not be my wife?"

"No; I could not be your wife, even if I loved you dearly."

"What barrier stands between you and me, Christie?"

Christie would doubtless have answered had she not seen the outlines of a man through the side of the tent. She recognized the form—it was that of Antelope Arth.

During the lull in their conversation the young messenger walked away, and, seating himself, entered into conversation with pretty Miss Loomis.

After a while Adam Farwell left Christie's presence with a look of disappointment upon his face. Herbert Dorne read the result of his interview at a glance.

The ladies prepared supper that evening for all, the rangers partaking with a relish that had been sharpened by hard travel and insufficient food; and after the meal had been dispatched the horses corraled, guards posted and a huge, roaring camp-fire lighted, the party gathered around within its ruddy glow

Some of the men sat down on the ground, others on logs, and some reclined at full length on the earth. The ladies occupied camp-stools, in a circle at one side. It was rather an exceptional party to be gathered around an open camp-fire on the plains of Dakota. It was composed of elements seldom found together on the border. There were Dan and Kit, rude old men whose lives had been spent among the dangers and excitements of the mountain and plain, and whose garb betokened the character of their calling. There were the rangers, young, robust and hearty, their eyes and faces beaming with the spirit of adventure; there the hunters in civilized garb; and last, but not least, the ladies, whose beaming faces threw an air of sociality over the camp, and commanded that respect due from gentlemen to the society of ladies—a restraint under which few had ever been placed by the side of a camp-fire.

Dakota Dan was unusually silent, as were the rangers also but Kit Bandy's tongue rattled smoothly along in that blunt outspoken manner so characteristic of the man.

Major Loomis, Herbert Dorne and Kit were the chief conversationists, and finally, when the subject turned upon Nevada, its mineral wealth, its social status, etc., Carson City came in for discussion by Kit Bandy.

"Carson, like Virginia City," said Mr. Dorne, "has been remarkable in local history. In the flush days of the mines law and order became secondary objects."

"Say thirddonary," said Kit, to the amusement of his auditors; "for silver war the fust consideration; whisky and poker second; then came your law and order, pistols and hemp."

"After you were elected justice of the peace, Kit, I think we had a better state of things in Carson," said Dorne.

"Great Judea!" exclaimed old Dan, "you don't pretend to say that my friend Kit has been a squire of the law, do you? You're jestin', ar'n't ye?"

"Not at all," replied Dorne, "Kit Bandy was really elected to the office, and presided with no little honor to himself."

"Why, Dan'l," said Kit, with a look of comical dignity, "you think beca'se I'm a rough old codger that I'm no great shakes; but I've held haydoogins of public offices and positions in my time. Arter I quit the ministry I studied law awhile, and the fust case I had I war under the painful necessity of lickin' the opposin' counsel, knockin' the justice down and routin' the jury, boss and foot."

"Then ye gained that suit," said Dan.

"Didn't I, though?" exclaimed Kit, with a sly wink that provoked an outburst of laughter from those who saw the expression of his face. "Wal, the next thing I did war to vacate that vacinity, and so took up the perfession of medicine—started a doctor-shop—but the undertaker made more money 'n I did in spite of me, and I quit that and branched out into the matrimony b'isness with Miss Sabina Ellen Frisby; and arter knockin' along, rough and tumble, a few years, quit that and pulled up in another place; then changed to Carson City whar the people had the good propriety to sock me into the seat of Justice. And you may bet yer bottom scad, boys, and—excuse me—ladies, also, that my administration war one of exemplary honesty and vim. If a lawyer disputed with me on any point of law I stacked *that*—and he shook aloft his fist—"right into his physiognomy, and that settled the matter. I'd never 'low a trial by jury—I could make up *my* mind 'bout the matter jist as easy as twelve men. And lots of times I never let the case come to trial. One squint at the defendant alers settled his hash, in *my* mind. I could tell whether he war guilty of stealin' or murder by his looks; and if he war, up he'd go—not, however, for ninety days, or one, or two, or twenty years, but up—to a limb. That's the way I dispensed justice to the Carson Cityites—jist raked 'em from taw. But, horn of Joshual of all the romantic scrapes I ever got into war doerin' my justiceship, and I'll tell ye 'bout it," and he changed position, fired a volley of tobacco-juice at a huge coal of fire that had dropped near his feet from the end of a burning stick, then resumed:

"One night, when I sot in my office reading a copy of Blackstun's Blue Laws of Connecticut, thar came a rap on the door eal to the butt of a young 'arthquake. 'Walk the chalk,' says I; and the door opened and a man in a mask came in, handed me a fifty-dollar bag of dust, and says he, 'I want you immedjately at the deserted Blue Ledge Mine in an official capacity, and no questions to be asked.'

"Wal, I thought it a leetle quar, but then I warn't afraid of all the men and mysteries in Nevada; and so I loaded up two revolvers, slipped a dirk in each boot, and followed my caller to the deserted mine. I war conducted into the long, dismal cavern whar the miners had drifted under the hill, and finally drew up in the midst of a party of six persons—three ladies and three men—besides my guide. They all wore masks. A lantern lit up the place with a sickish light, and—"

Here Kit stopped to take a fresh chew of tobacco, meanwhile glancing around him to see the effect of his words upon his audience. He saw that all were listening with great interest, although most of the rangers expected the story to terminate in a "sell." The women were the most devoted listeners; their faces even assuming a look of vague anxiety and fear. Christie Dorne and Amy Loomis sat in the door of the tent and the latter saw that her companion was really excited by the old man's story.

"Wal," continued Kit, "I squared myself afore the party, and demanded what was wanted, and then my guide said they wanted me to marry a couple of young folks. I objected at fust, but when all parties agreed that they war willin'—it war all right—and that they'd come down thar jist for the

romance of the thing, I axed 'em for their names, but this they declined to give for the novelty of the thing; and so, as it didn't make a dinged bit of difference to me, I up and married 'em—give 'em privilege to fight and quarrel till de'th did 'em part. Then the bride give me a ring of peculiar make and the bridegroom give me a nugget of gold, and said that whenever they got ready to make themselves known, they'd come to me and describe the secret of the Blue Ledge Mine, and the gifts, and then I would know who the mysterious pair war. But I've waited and waited, and they came not; and I'm afeard now they've extarminated each other long ago, and—"

At this juncture a rifle sounded near; and a cry issued from the lips of Amy Loomis.

In a moment every man was upon his feet. Herbert Dorne and Loomis rushed to the tent, where they found Amy supporting the unconscious form of Christie in her arms.

CHAPTER XXXII.

ANTELOPE ARTH'S REVELATION.

THE report of the rifle and the simultaneous fall of Christie Dorne into the arms of her young friend, Amy Loomis, led to one conclusion—Christie had been shot! Her brother ran to the tent and lifted her in his arms, calling her name in tones of distress; but there was no response.

"Major, my sister has been killed—assassinated by some lurking fiend!"

"I see no wound, Herbert," said the bluff old major, who, assisted by Amy, examined the unconscious girl.

Meanwhile, a number of the rangers had hurried away in the direction from whence the rifle report came; and before Christie's friends had discovered the fact, one of them came back with the report that the shot had been fired by one of the guards at a skulking wolf, and not at the maiden.

"She has fainted away, Herbert," said Amy, excitedly. "She has been very nervous and excited all the evening."

"Yes, yes," replied the major, "she must be kept quiet. Her nervous system is completely prostrated by the ordeal through which she has passed. The least excitement brings on a relapse. No doubt the story of Squire Bandy produced this shock. She must be kept quiet, I say, Herbert."

The major's words were not disregarded, and the greatest silence and caution were observed by the rangers after the maiden had been nursed back to life by her friends. Amy Loomis and Christie's brother remained in the tent with her, and after she had fully recovered her consciousness, Amy went out, leaving the brother and sister alone.

Herbert sat down upon a camp-stool, and resting his elbows upon his knee and his head upon his palms, became deeply absorbed in silent thought. Christie noticed his reflective mood, and she knew by the occasional deep-drawn sighs that he was troubled. Finally she said:

"Herbert, your hunting excursion is turning out to be an excursion of trouble, instead of pleasure."

"Yes, Christie; it has been one of continual difficulties ever since we left the settlement. I think if the Government troops can't keep the outlaw Indians in their reservation, they had better delegate the authority to the settlers and hunters."

"The white outlaws are the cause of it, Herbert," replied Christie.

"I know they are the chief element of all this deviltry. They do the brain work and the Indians the mischief. And I am not certain that we are entertaining angels unawares to-night."

"To whom do you refer?"

"Those reputed rangers—followers of Idaho Tom," responded Herbert, watching his sister closely.

"Then you still maintain your hostility toward Tom?" she responded.

"No more than to any other outlaw."

"Herbert, Tom is no outlaw. This will be proved to you some day," she said, half bitterly, half pleading.

"Do you still love him, Christie? Will you spurn the affection of a gentleman like Mr. Farwell for the fickle love of such a young scapegrace as Idaho Tom?"

"I do not love Mr. Farwell, Herbert—I cannot love him."

"Ah, Christie! you still persist in adding disgrace to the once honored name of Dorne," said the brother, bitterly. "I labored to help hide your shame that you might be comfortably settled in a home of wealth and luxury—such as only Adam Farwell can give. And then I, too, would be restored to my former place among mankind—the place from which poverty brought me down to a level with a poor, plodding frontier settler."

"Brother!" cried Christie, her eyes flashing with indignation, "your motives are selfish! You would have me wed Farwell for the sake of his money. You care nothing for my happiness so that you accomplish your objects."

"My lady!" he said, angrily, "I will not put up with this conduct much longer; I will leave you alone in poverty and disgrace."

"Herbert, I am not in a mood to quarrel," she said; "my sisterly love forbids it. I have never harbored an evil thought toward you, through all my patient suffering. You are my brother and protector, and I feel that I am bound to respect

you as such, when your guardianship does not encroach upon my eternal happiness."

With a muttered oath upon his lips, the selfish brother left the tent and poor Christie to her bitter thoughts.

During the night the three men who had gone north among the hills, elk-hunting, returned, bringing the news that they had seen a party of outlaws and Indians moving westward through the hills, with a white male prisoner, bound hand and foot upon a horse, in their power. From the description of the prisoner, the horse he bestrode, and the party that had him in custody, there was not a doubt left in the minds of the rangers but that it was their young captain, Idaho Tom.

Dakota Dan was for taking up the trail that night and starting in pursuit, but some opposed him on account of the darkness.

"Tut, tut," said the old ranger, "do you think the Triangle can't foller a trail in the darkest night that ever hung over yearth? What's Humility's nose for? What's Patience's ears for? and what's my eyes for? Ay, boys! set man, hoof and howler in motion if ye want to see the Triangle work; git the cogs all to smashin just right, and I tell ye what, we can foller the year-old trail of a steamer across the Atlantic Ocean. Boys, I'm anxious to be upon the trail of them varmints. I feel more at home on the trail; besides, boys, I've had a presentiment—a presentiment that I'd soon foller my last trail."

"Fie, Dan," said Darcy Cooper, "you're good for several years yet. Never say die as long as you can navigate."

"I may be, lad, so far as constitution and health is concerned. I hope so, at least; for I hold a purty stiddy narve yit; my eyes reaches out well; and the rest of the Triangle seems real sprightly. We ought to last a while yit, notwithstanding my presentiment of somethin' to come. The Rackbacks alers b'lieved in presentiments—runs in the blood, and hits nearly every time. But, boys, if ye all say wait till mornin', why, wait it is."

Thus the matter rested for the time being.

The night wore away, and the dawn ushered in the new day.

Bright and early the camp was astir, for the rangers were to take the trail in pursuit of their young leader, while the hunters were to start on their homeward journey.

Christie Dorne was feeling much better this morning, and walked about camp with a vague, restless look on her face. She had heard the news that the hunters brought in concerning the supposed captivity of Idaho Tom; and although it added anew to her grief, she felt hopeful that the expedition going to his relief, under the renowned Dakota Dan, would effect his release before injury or harm would befall him.

A few minutes before the departure of the rangers, Antelope Arth approached Christie, who rested on a fallen log at one side, and said:

"Pardon my intrusion, Miss Dorne, for I know you prefer to be alone. I desire to speak a few words to you, and shall speak directly to the point. You are in love; this I have learned from different sources. You love Idaho Tom; but you are not the only one that loves him."

Christie started and looked with wild-eyed astonishment into the young ranger's face.

"My words surprise you, I know; but hear me through, Miss Dorne," the youth continued. "The daughter of a robber saw Idaho Tom, and fell desperately in love with him. Her name was Aree Van Pruss. Three times in succession she saved his life. The last time was the night you left him on the plain. The outlaws captured him and buried him alive; Aree rescued him—Aree loves him dearly and has made every effort to win his love, but all in vain."

"Mr. Clayton, how do you know all this?" Christie asked.

"I'll tell you," he said, in a low tone, "but you mustn't betray me; I am that girl, Aree Van Pruss!"

Christie could scarcely suppress a cry of surprise at this revelation, but by a mighty effort she succeeded in maintaining silence, until she was enabled to speak composedly.

"You—you a woman?" she stammered.

"Yes, I am Aree," replied the youth, and he showed that his mustache was false, and that the nut-brown color of his little hands and handsome face was the stain of walnut-juice. "I am a robber's daughter, and have feared being recognized by Kit Bandy more than all others here. He was formerly of our band, and when he recognized my horse and saddle I was sure he would then penetrate my disguise. But, fortunately, he has not, nor do I want him to. I donned this disguise for one purpose—that I might be near the man I loved—Idaho Tom. I recognized you by the picture in his possession, then by keeping on the alert I overheard enough to satisfy me that you loved, and were loved, and that Idaho Tom was the man. Then weaving the different threads together that I had thus picked up, and adding one other fact—that which caused you to sink in a swoon last night—I discovered a secret of which you and I alone, of all here, have the faintest idea."

Christie turned white, and for a moment it seemed she would sink fainting to the earth. Aree, the beautiful child of the hills, for such Antelope Arth really was, saw her emotions, and at once came to her rescue, as it were.

"Do not fear me, Christie," she said; "for although I love Idaho Tom, I feel no envy, no jealousy. My woman's instinct, rendered all the more sensitive by the yearnings of love, read the secret of your young heart. I do not wonder that you have suffered; I only wonder that you have withstood the terrible shock that you have been subjected to, at all. Idaho Tom has been in my power, and the first impulse of my heart was to let no other enjoy the love I so yearned for. But my better nature prevailed, and through hopes of the future I set him at liberty. But now I see there is no hope

still I do not regret what I have done, and shall do even more. If Tom is a prisoner, he will be taken to the stronghold of Prairie Paul, and thither I am now going. If he is there, I will again liberate him and send him to you with all my blessings."

"Oh, kind friend!" exclaimed Christie, "do this for me, and I will never cease to pray for you."

"I felt in hopes," Aree continued, "that he had escaped, and joined his command; and as I said before, I donned this disguise that I might be near him. Do not tell Kit Bandy of it, nor your friends. I am going to slip away and return to my hidden home among the hills. You may think me a bold, bad girl, Christie; but God knows I have lived a pure and virtuous life, even though I am a robber's child. For years have I been shut out from all pleasure and society save that of the Indians and mountain men. I have known what good society and its influence were—I have not lived all my days in the hills, where my whole existence has been a constant yearning for something—I knew not what. When I, by accident, first beheld the face of Idaho Tom, my heart grasped at his love as a drowning man grasps at a straw. But all is now lost—irretrievably lost. But I thank Heaven that I have been, and that I still may be, permitted to do some good in this world—to make others happy. Some day, Christie, if I know where you are living, I may come—"

Here she leaned forward and whispered the rest in Christie's ear; then, rising to her feet, walked away toward the point where her horse was hitched.

Christie blushed, and stammered a reply, but in her confusion, she spoke only to herself. For quite a minute she was completely overcome, but recovering her presence of mind, she put her thoughts to work.

Her own woman's instinct told her that Antelope Arth was a woman, and the impression left upon her mind was a favorable one. It gave her relief, for she believed, since Aree had probed the great secret of her life, that the robber's child would keep her word.

Antelope Arth was suddenly missing from the grove, but no one save Christie knew aught of his absence.

The rangers, the Triangle, and Kit Bandy, took their departure westward, and soon after the hunters turned their faces toward Mennovale.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

ON THE TRAIL.

KIT BANDY acted as guide in the pursuit of Idaho Tom and his captors, and Dakota Dan as scout.

By noon they reached the eastern foothills of the mountains, and halted for dinner just outside of the line that marked the eastern boundary of the Sioux reservation.

Before resuming their journey, they decided upon their course of action. From what the elk-hunters had told them, they felt fully satisfied that the captive seen in the power of the enemy was none other than Idaho Tom; and from the course they were following, Kit Bandy felt certain that he would be taken at once to the stronghold of Prairie Paul. As the ex-robber's ideas seemed altogether probable, the party agreed to make its way directly toward the outlaw's den, and so at once continued their journey.

In an hour or so Dakota Dan struck the track of five or six horses leading westward, and without a single doubt in the minds of any one of the party, it was decided to be the trail of those of whom they were in pursuit. Acting upon this general decision, old Dan was put upon the lead, the rest following behind.

"I'm in my element now, squire," Dan said, as he shuffled along, his dog before him, and his mare behind; "put me on a trail if you want to git downright bis'ness outen us. I was raised on the trail, Bandy, and 'spect to die on the trail."

"Dan-yil," said Kit, facetiously, "I've done a bit of trailin' in my days, too, and I'm not so slow either. I used to be a detective in Frisco, and the way I scented out crime was a caution to wrong-doers. Then I used to be a trapper in the Santa Barbara valley, and the maddest I ever war war when I war thar. Trap-thieves war plentier than game, and thar was a feller named Traplift—a nickname—that made a business of stealin' from the traps of us old trappers; and so one night six of us met and held a meetin' to take steps to hunt Traplift down, and we had everything arranged to catch him and went to our cabin to wait till the time for action come. That night a light skiff of snow fell—the first that I'd ever seen in the Santa Barbara—and I just come to the conclusion it war sent for our especial benefit to catch Traplift. Bright and early I set out, and, would you believe it, I struck that dinged old thief's track in the valley afore I'd gone a mile. I follered it on and on for not less than ten miles, and finally tracked him to his hole—a cave in the mountain side, and when I worked around and got inside the den, what do you think I found, Dan-yil?"

"Traplifter, in course."

"Traplifter, thunder! I found a paper on which were writ these words: 'Not much, ole fools, for I'm goin' to waltz backwards,' and then I seed that he'd retreated from the cave, *walkin' backwards*; and he got away, stealin' from every trap as he went, the ornery old vagabond."

Dan indulged in a low outburst of laughter as he replied:

"You couldn't fool the Triangle that way, Bandy—you

couldn't, for a fact. That pup could foller a year old trail of a ship—fact; and whenever he gits to the end of a trail he's sure to find something thar. Now, here we are on the trail of Idaho Thomas, as we firmly believe, and when we reach the end of it, why we 'spect to find Tom on it."

"I hope so, Dan," said Darcy Cooper; "and I hope he will be alive."

"Where will we cross the Powder, Kit?—at that ford which we crossed coming out?" asked Nat Osmond.

"Ya-as; we'll strike the river 'bout thar, and if we have any trouble at all gittin' into the hills, it'll be at that point," said Bandy.

"Why are we any more likely to strike trouble there," asked Cooper, "than any other point?"

"Well, the varmints may find out we're follerin' 'em, or else suspect that we are, and so set a trap for us as they did comin' down. That ford'll be a good place to git into a fight, boys."

"Fight's our ticket, and so let 'em come," said old Dan. "I want you to see the Triangle in a fight once, Bandy. Great Judeal but you'll see sparks fly outen the atmosphere."

"Horn of Joshua! I've seed sparks fly outen my eyes a million times durin' my residence with my wife, Sabina. She war a pizen old critter 'bout shovin' a stick of wood or the shovel into a feller's face or ribs. I think Sabina's caliber war about that of yer mare, Patience, Dan-yil."

"Don't cast any insinuations onto that mare, Bourbon, or I'll demand satisfaction at the pint of the bagonet."

"I'm sure, Dan-yil, this is a free country, especially to speak of one's b'loved wife and pard. If you don't take it as a compliment, why back it goes."

Thus Dan and Kit carried on a sort of desultory conversation for some time, and finally, as the sun sunk low in the western sky, the two old bordermen proposed that they should halt for the night. To this the young men made no dissent, and so they drew rein in a wooded valley, where grass, water and fuel could be obtained.

As it wanted an hour or two yet of night, Dan proposed to Kit that they make a reconnoissance of the surrounding vicinity, and his proposition being accepted, the two left camp, going in opposite directions.

The old man had been gone scarcely ten minutes ere a number of mounted men rode out of the woods and surrounded the camp of the rangers. They were dressed in the uniform of United States soldiers, which the rangers knew, at a glance, they were.

"Gentlemen, I demand your unconditional surrender," said the captain in command.

Although the rangers were completely taken by surprise, they were not long in deciding upon their course of action, and at once manifested a disposition to refuse the officer's demand.

Said Darcy Cooper, to whom the young men now looked as spokesman:

"We feel that we are under no military restrictions, and have the privilege of refusing your demands."

"Sir, we have instructions to arrest and conduct from these hills all persons found here in violation of the Government's treaty with the Indians; therefore we insist upon a peaceable surrender."

"We are not a band of cowards, by any means, captain," responded Cooper; "and while we feel no fear whatever, we should like to have an amicable understanding, that we may be permitted to pursue our way into the hills. We have but one object now in view, in coming here, and that is the rescue of a friend in the power of a band of outlaws, and soon as he is safe, it is our intention to leave at once."

"Then I am to understand that you will resist any attempt to stop you from advancing further?" said the officer, though he maintained his composure with remarkable good grace.

"You are, captain," was Darcy's firm reply.

"But we have quite a little army encamped near here, under General Custer, with which I am afraid you would stand no show whatever."

"Very probably, if we have the army to contend with; but I think if our case, with some additional facts, were stated to the general, he would allow us to pass on unmolested."

"As to that, I cannot say," answered the officer; "but as I am acting under instructions, I—"

"What in the great horn of Joshua means this?" exclaimed a voice near, and Kit Bandy came blustering into camp. "Sojers, by crackkeys! Howdy, boys?"

The soldiers regarded the old man with a look of the deepest curiosity, and a smile mounted the face of some, as Kit struck an attitude before them.

Darcy Cooper explained the situation briefly as possible and asked Kit's opinion.

"Horn of Joshua!" exclaimed Kit, scratching his head, reflectively, "this is a ruther perplexin' attitude to pass judgment on. I can't see how we can give up our pursuit, even if Uncle Sam is desirous of keepin' inviolate his contract with the Indians. I notice the red varmints are not so partic'ler 'bout keepin' up their side of the fence. But, captain, I really can't see how we can s'render without a fight."

"We are not insisting on a fight," replied the officer, for he saw that there was mettle in the little band of rangers worthy of his own steel; "we only desire that you submit to be quietly escorted from this reservation."

"I wish old Dan-yil war here," said Kit, perplexedly, "and I think he would settle things his way. But see here, captain, you leave yer men here to watch these boys, and take me up to the general, and I'll bet a tip that I talk him outen takin' us away afore we git our friend."

The captain accepted this proposition, for it would afford the opportunity to make the situation known at camp without creating any mistrust in the breast of the rangers. He was really afraid to attempt coercive measures, for he saw the boys were well armed and ready for fight; and so he dismounted, and leading his horse, walked with old Kit up the valley toward camp.

As they moved along, the captain noticed that there was a material change in both the appearance and talk of the old borderman, and at once came to the conclusion that he was playing a part. But it was no trouble for Kit Bandy to play a double role, for he had already proved himself one of those persons past finding out.

Ten minutes' walk brought them to the edge of the camp; they passed the guard and moved on toward General Custer's tent. On the way they met the general, to whom the captain introduced Kit, and explained the latter's desire of an interview with the commandant.

Custer led the way to his tent, that was located at the base of a high shelving rock, and when it was reached they entered. The general seated himself upon a camp stool, and motioned Kit to a seat opposite. By this time it was dark, and the tent was lit up with a dim light from a pocket lantern.

"Now, then," said the general, "I am ready to hear what you have to say."

"To begin with, general," said Kit, modifying his tone to a degree that would have surprised his friends, "I will say that, should the secret that I am going to reveal to you become known to some of—well, should it become generally known, it would cost me my life!"

"I fully comprehend," said the general; "you are not what you appear to your friends."

"I daresay, general, I have appeared for an old fool, and have been taken as such; but that's not business. Here's a document," said Kit, producing a stained and dirty paper from an inner pocket, "that I want you to examine, and then see, sir, what you have to offer on the subject."

The general took the paper, and in the dim light that lit up the tent, examined it carefully—reading it over a number of times. Kit watched the man's face, and finally detected a faint light of satisfaction upon it.

Finally the general lifted his eyes from the paper and said:

"But what about those rangers? Have you or they a—"

"That, general—that," interrupted Kit, pointing his long, bony finger at the paper, "gives me the right to call assistance if needed, don't you see?"

"Then those men are under your command, are they?"

"Wal," said Kit, squirming under the question, "I—I rather think they are, general."

"You think they are?"

"No; I don't think anything about it—I know it," said Kit, his quick mind grasping at a plausible, and, at the same time, truthful subterfuge.

"Then I presume I have no grounds for interference, Mr. Bandy," said the general, "and will allow you to pass on unmolested."

"Thank you, general, thank you; but I've one request to make of you, and that is this: don't let any one get a hold of what I've told you, for I'd not be safe 'mong friends or foes if it got out."

"I shall not break confidence with you, Mr. Bandy."

"Very well, then, our affairs are understood—you go your way and I go mine, and mum's the word."

"Exactly."

Kit rose to leave. He advanced to the door of the tent, turned to bid the general good-night, when his keen eye happened to catch sight of a dark, spherical object under the general's camp-stool. It was shaded from the light, and what it was, Kit could not determine at a glance, but it arrested his attention from some cause or other; and a moment later a cry of surprise broke from his lips.

"What's the matter, Mr. Bandy?" asked the general, starting to his feet, and permitting the light to fall almost under the stool.

"By the horn of Joshua!—general, I'm gone up!"

"Why?"

"Don't you keep guards posted 'round camp?"

"I do; but I declare this is getting to be—"

"Look there, general; do you see that slit in the canvas just back of your stool?—well, sir, if an eavesdropping human head wasn't withdrawn from there this moment, I hope I may never breathe."

"Then it was none of my men!" exclaimed the general, and rushing out, he gave orders to hunt the skulking enemy down.

"By Judea, Humility!" he exclaimed, in an undertone, stooping and laying his hand upon the dog's head significant of silence; "thar's either Indians, or robbers, or a gang of miners thereaways; and if it's robs, the young captain may be with them. Howsumdever, we'll feel off that way and make some inquiry. Now go easy, Humility—easy."

He stole like a shadow down the valley, keeping well in under the eastern bluffs. The forms of men passing to and fro across the light became discernible as he advanced, and as one fire after another burst on his view as he rounded a sharp curve in the valley, he became somewhat astonished as well as apprehensive of danger. He finally, however, succeeded in making out the encampment as that of a military party, and the discovery served, in a measure, to quiet his fears.

Dan stopped to deliberate upon the matter, and while thus engaged, he saw an officer and Kit Bandy making their way toward the only tent in the bivouac—the head-quarters of the commandant. He saw by Kit's gesture and movements throughout that the old ex-robber was unusually enthusiastic over something or other, and no sooner did he disappear in the general's tent than the spirit of curiosity possessed him. Why it was he could not tell, for no thought suggested it. He did not mistrust Kit in anyway, and yet that unbidden desire which often forces one to act upon the spur of the moment, and contrary to what they would had they taken the second thought, seized upon Dan, and sent him creeping with all the silence of a cat toward the tent.

He had everything in his favor so far as darkness and the cover of rock and brush were concerned. To the perpendicular facade of the bluff flanking the camp on the north, and against which the tent stood, was entrusted the guardianship of that side; and so the old ranger encountered no picket there when he reached the bluff. This much accomplished he began to descend the declivity, and in a minute he was in the rear of the tent. Creeping on hands and knees to the side of the structure, he listened. He heard the preliminaries that prefaced the opening of the occupants' conversation, but not being satisfied with this; he inserted the point of his knife into the canvas behind the general, and cut a slit through which he could put his head. He felt safe enough in doing this, for he could see the outlines of the general through the canvas, and with his head half-thrust through the slit, he listened to the two men's conversation.

The old ranger was not a little surprised at what he heard Kit state, and yet it was but evidence of what he had mistrusted as soon, almost, as he met him. But what Kit Bandy's mission could be, he could not form the faintest conception. However, he resolved to hear the conversation through, and he did so—withdrawing his head from the tent a moment too late to escape the keen eyes of Kit Bandy.

Fortunately, however, he was not recognized by the old man, owing to the shadows that enveloped his face; but he heard Bandy's exclamation of surprise, and at once made all possible haste from the confines of the encampment.

Once in the woods, the old ranger had no fears of danger from pursuit, and moved away more leisurely. He aimed to retrace his footsteps to camp, and had hoped to get there ahead of Kit, but, owing to the darkness, he became somewhat bewildered in the strange, sinuous windings of the valley and wooded labyrinths of the hills, and was led on a mile or two further from camp. He finally stopped to get his bearings, and in looking around, discovered the faint glimmer of a light some distance north of him. He knew at once that this light must be in the camp of enemies, and he resolved to reconnoiter if he did not get back to his friends that night. So he at once moved away in that direction, feeling certain that he would find the party that had Idaho Tom in custody around the camp-fire before him.

It required but a few minutes' walk to bring him in close proximity to the camp, and to his delight he found that it was the party, true enough, that had Captain Tom a prisoner. He had obtained a position where he could peer into the camp. He could see six or eight men stalking about apparently laboring under some uneasiness. He also caught sight of Idaho Tom, who was seated against a tree, with his hands and feet bound.

The question now arose in Dan's mind: how was he going to effect his young friend's release? To return to camp and bring the rangers to his assistance was quite feasible, yet while gone, the robbers might leave also, and the only chance to rescue Tom be forever lost. In a fight, he would not stand the shadow of a chance with seven men. He had left his rifle at camp, but was provided with a pair of revolvers and a knife.

The old ranger was not long in making up his mind as to the course he should pursue. He resolved to try stratagem first, as he could see that the robbers were already excited and apparently upon the eve of flight from some cause or other.

Owing to the timber and the condition of the surroundings, Dan believed that the opposite side of the camp would suit his purpose far better than the one he occupied, and so he at once began creeping around that way.

He had gone but a short distance when he found his footsteps arrested by a deep rift or canon. He felt the cold wind rush up into his face, and when he tossed a pebble down over the precipice a deep, hollow rumble came up from below. But not to be outdone, he turned and crept along the edge of the canon, passing within twenty steps of the enemies' camp, and finally gaining a position on the east side. He was sure he had gained this position unobserved, but no sooner had he ensconced himself therein than he heard footsteps retreating therefrom toward camp; and a moment later, he saw a man enter camp in no little excitement.

Dan knew full well what was up, and at once began to put

CHAPTER XXXIV.

DAKOTA DAN'S ADVENTURES.

DAKOTA DAN and his dog made their way north, after parting with the rangers at camp. Their course lay along a rough, wooded ridge, that finally dipped into a wide, densely-timbered valley; and despite the old man's efforts, it was nearly dusk ere he reached this low low-land. He turned down the valley, moving along briskly for nearly a mile, when he was brought to a sudden halt by sight of a number of camp-fires twinkling through the night before him.

distance between himself and camp. He had gone but a short way, however, when he came to the edge of the rift again, and was compelled to bear to the left; but to his surprise and fear, he had gone but a short distance in this direction, when he found himself on the edge of another yawning chasm.

The situation was growing rather alarming to the old ranger, for, with an abyss on either side, and an overwhelming number of foes behind him, the chance of escape was but one in many, for he felt satisfied that the two canons came together, and that he was in the forks from whence there was no escape save by the route he had entered. But this was now impossible. Seven men with glaring pine torches were in hot pursuit of him. The space between the two rifts was not more than four rods wide, and rapidly growing narrower. Dan retreated to the point where the two chasms met like the arms of the letter Y. Then he glanced back. His pursuers were within three rods of him. The glare of their dashing, flickering torches fell upon him. Humility barked fiercely—dashed out at the advancing foe, then came bounding back to his master's side.

The robbers fired several random shots after the dog; then Dan heard one of them say:

"We've got the old devil caged, and will shoot him or drive him over the precipice. Close up, boys, and look sharp; don't let him escape."

Dan knew that it was death to be taken alive, or death to stand still, so he turned and glanced over the abyss. The enemy were now so close that he could see the black chasm in the glare of their torches. It was fully thirty feet across. Low, scrubby trees grew on either side of the canon, and inclining slightly inward, interlaced their long, gnarled boughs over the dismal depths.

"Humility, old dorg," he said, "this is tightest of the tight—we'll have to leap or die, pup."

As the last word fell from his lips, the old ranger turned and made a leap into the air over the mouth of the awful abyss, and seizing a long limb of the nearest tree, crept along it hand-over-hand, dangling and swaying over the black rift. He soon reached the extremity of the limb, but another bough, that was thrust out from the opposite side, was within reach. Seizing it, the agile old ranger transferred himself along it to the opposite side of the rift, and—was safe!

So quickly had the old man made this move, that the rift separated him from his enemies before the latter were aware of the fact. As they came up, the cunning old borderman opened fire upon them with his revolvers, filling them with consternation and the fury of baffled triumph.

"Come over, darn ye, if ye want to fight it out," Dan shouted from the covert in the dark.

Prairie Paul, who led the chase, hurled back a furious oath at the old man, at the same time firing upon him at random.

"Ha! ha!" laughed the old borderman, in mocking triumph, "you want to be keeful, fellers, how you foolish with a tornado, for I'd have you know the Triangle's no summer zephyr."

Furious at this, one of the robbers threw his burning torch across the chasm in hopes of its light revealing the form of the ranger; but the latter was where the light could not reach him, and yet where he could see the robbers and use his revolvers upon them with such effect that they were driven to cover, with two or three seriously wounded men.

They threw their torches aside, but kept up a random firing upon the old borderman, without any effect whatever. Dan, however, at once perceived their object: it was to hold him there while the others were being sent around the head of the canon to attack the ranger in the rear.

Humility had escaped by breaking through the enemy's line, and passing around the gorge, soon joined his master, in the wildest delight.

"Bully for you, pup," exclaimed the ranger, beside himself with joy; "I war mortal afraid you'd git plugged to your system, ole dorg; but—"

"Bow-wow!" barked the dog.

"Dan-yil," exclaimed a voice in the old man's ear, and a heavy hand fell upon his shoulder.

CHAPTER XXXV.

KIT BANDY KNOCKS UNDER.

DAKOTA DAN at once recognized the voice that addressed him. It was that of Kit Bandy.

"Friend Kit," said the ranger, "how does it come that you are here?"

"Great horn of Joshua, Dan-yil! I am out reconnoiter in'."

"Wal, I am glad to meet you, for I've found the boy—the young captain—and the robbers have found me. They got me penned up atwixt them gorges awhile ago, but I got away by doin' somethin' I couldn't do ag'in to save my life."

"Thar's no tellin', Dan-yil, what a man can do or stand, till he's been married as I have been. Married life, Dan—"

"Harkee, man, harkee! The vagrants are comin' down this side of the gorge; the pup tells me so."

"Then a healthier locality is sum'at desirable," replied Kit, and turning he led the way back from the gorge with a silence that surprised Dakota Dan.

After he had gone a dozen rods or so, Bandy stopped and said:

"You say Captain Idaho Tom's at the dasted sinners' camp?"

"Ya-as; haltered up to a tree, hand and foot."

"What can we do to'r'd releasing him? Can't I stand back in the woods and yell and holler and make 'em believe an army's comin', while you sail into camp, lick the outlaws and release the capt'in?—couldn't we do this like a charm, Dan-yil?"

"Wal, now," said Dan, reflectively, "we could, in case I war able to do my part, and you war able to impress the robbers with the b'lief that you war an army."

"That's easy enough, Dan-yil, easy enough; I l'arnt how of Sabina—she that was my wife. Let's pull off in that direction, anyhow."

The two men stole rapidly away through the night, and were soon in the vicinity of the robbers' camp; although there was nothing but Dan's recollection of its location to tell them where it was, for the fire had been extinguished.

They had gone but a short way when Humility betrayed signs of uneasiness that put his master on his guard, and suddenly Kit touched him on the arm and said in a whisper:

"Right ahead, Dan-yil, do you see that light?"

"Yas, I do; and ar'n't it one of 'em robber lights in the glass ball?"

"To be sure it is; but hold on, man. Don't you dare fire onto it, fur it may be on the breast of our friend, Tom. The varmints 'll do anything to git even with us. I know 'em, Dan-yil, like a book."

They watched the light until it disappeared, then they crept away softly in the direction it had gone. They soon came within sound of retreating hoof-strokes, and the first supposition of the two men was that the outlaws had taken to horse and were leaving for safer quarters. Without a moment's hesitation, the two men continued on in pursuit of them.

They had journeyed nearly a mile when Humility suddenly stopped with a low growl which brought our two friends to a sudden halt. The next instant half a dozen rifles flashed before them, and as many bullets cut through the air close to their heads.

"Horn that blew up old Jericho!" burst from Kit's lips; "we're in a dinged cowardly trap, Dan-yil."

"Scat!" cried old Dan; "they're comin'!"

The two old fellows now became the pursued, and a lively race ensued, despite the darkness.

Being unfamiliar with the ground, Dan and Kit were compelled to pick their way with caution, while the enemy followed wherever they went, by the sound of their footsteps. And that the enemy were gaining upon them became plainly evident after they had traversed half a mile of the treacherous hills.

"Kit, if we don't dodge the lopin' bloodhounds, very soon, we'll be compelled to give battle," said Dan.

"That's a very trustworthy statement, friend Dan-yil," returned Kit; "but I think that we're bein' pursued by a gang of Ingins at this holy second, for no white man could foller us as they 'pear to be doin'."

"Ingins are the Triangle's best holt, Bandy; give us a hundred or two red-skins if you want to hear a tornado git up and howl. Pity that Patience, my mare, aren't here, for then the set'd be full—the cogs'd all mash together. Judea! Bourbon, that ole mare can act'ly kick so hard that she can knock fire outen the darkness, and that pup—Heavens!"

The clash of firearms behind them interrupted old Dan's expatiations, and forced an exclamation, that was half a groan, from Kit's lips. Dan paid no particular attention to it at the time, but when Bandy began to lag behind, while he labored on with a heavy breathing, grave apprehensions rose in his mind, and were strengthened by the queer actions of Humility, who dashed backward and forward between the two men, whining uneasily.

"Bourbon," said the old ranger, "what's the matter? Are you giving out?"

"No, Dan-yil," replied the other, laboriously. "I got hit with a bullet—I got an ugly hole bored into my system, and gallons and gallons of blood has wasted away. I'm about done for, ole pard."

"Oh, Lord!" groaned Dan; "can't you hold out and pull through to camp? Lean on me, Bandy, and—"

"No, no, Dan-yil!" exclaimed the old man, sinking down. "it's no use—I can't do it. Go, and leave me; save yourself, and tell the boys how I died."

"Bandy, I can't leave a friend in danger."

"They can't do me any more harm, Dan-yil, for I'm undone. Go, I say, or, by heavens, man! I will have to shoot you to keep the red devils from torturing you to death," he said, with a terrible earnestness.

Dan heard the click of Kit's revolver, and that the dying man meant what he said the ranger had not a doubt; and turning, he moved away—leaving a friend in danger to save himself for the first time in his eventful life. But he felt no compunctions of remorse—he felt that the end justified the means. He had gone but a short distance when he heard a pistol-shot and a groan; then followed a savage yell which told him that Kit Bandy, dead or alive, had been found by the enemy!

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE SECRET IN THE FIRE.

It was broad daylight ere Dakota Dan reached camp with the sad intelligence of Kit Bandy's fate. The young rangers had passed a night of painful anxiety and uneasiness, and

the news that Dan now brought in affected them deeply. During their short sojourn together, the old ex-robber had won their confidence and esteem by his dauntless courage, his kindness of heart, and jovial, whimsical expressions; and while they mourned his loss as a friend, they also mourned him as a leader in search of their beloved young captain, Idaho Tom. It was true, Dakota Dan was his superior in every respect pertaining to the hills and prairies, but he knew not so well the sinuous windings that led to the hidden den of Prairie Paul. However, the youths themselves knew about where the location of the stronghold was, and without delay pushed on into the hills.

The soldiers broke camp and pushed southward about daylight, so that there was no appeal to them for assistance.

The Powder river was but a few miles away, and straight toward the ford where they had crossed a few nights previous the rangers held their way.

The valley along which they traveled was wide and but sparsely wooded, and as they journeyed on, Dakota Dan kept a close watch on every side as if apprehensive of danger. They had nearly reached the ford, and were discussing the probabilities of danger around it, when a score of mounted Indians and outlaws swept out of a narrow defile on the right of the valley behind them, and with a yell charged toward them.

With deliberate calmness the rangers drew rein, turned in their saddles and sent a volley of lead back at the foe, emptying a number of saddles and causing the survivors to check up in their breakneck advance. Some dismounted and dodged in among the rocks and bushes on the hillsides, and stealing along, opened a fire from their covert.

The young rangers at once saw the propriety of retreat and so pushed on toward the ford. But, to their surprise, a number of enemies suddenly appeared between them and the river to dispute their passage.

"By the livin' thunder!" cried old Dan, "we're gittin' into a confounded deefickiltous trap, boys."

"Can't we strike the river by turning off through this defile?" asked Darcy Cooper.

"We can try it," said Dan, wheeling into the passage at the right and spurring away.

With a yell the enemy came in pursuit.

The rangers galloped up the little, narrow valley and soon found their way disputed by the rushing river. There was no escape up or down the stream, and it was plainly evident now that they had been caught in the very trap set for them.

"Boys," said old Dan, "thar's but two ways outen this deetrappily, and that's to cut our way back, or swim to yan island that bears the ruins of an old fort. Say now yerselves which it shall be."

"Swim to the island!" cried the rangers, in a breath.

Dakota Dan spoke to his mare; she moved forward and leaped into the river, and struck out toward the island with her master upon her back. One by one the reckless young rangers followed his example, and ere the enemy were aware of the fact, they had reached the island, putting more than twenty rods of deep, rushing water between them and the eastern shore, and nearly the same width on the opposite side.

The island was nearly an acre in area, and was covered with the ruins of long wooden buildings—the relics of the North-western Fur Men. Behind these walls and decaying roofs the rangers found shelter for both themselves and animals, but were none too soon in gaining it. The enemy rushed up the pass behind them and swarmed over the hills like a pack of famishing wolves. From their coverts on the top of the bluff overlooking the river, they watched for a glimpse of the pursued men and fired upon them whenever it was obtained. But the distance was all of forty rods, and most of the shots fell wide of their mark, and were buried in the logs of the building.

Meanwhile, the rangers were also on the alert, and whenever an opportunity was afforded, put in a shot at the enemy. Dakota Dan became unusually lively and spirited, for he was now in the light of his element. He did not give himself a moment's trouble as to how they would get away, or withstand a prolonged siege without provisions for themselves and food for their animals.

"Don't borrow trouble, boys," he said, in reply to a question on this subject; "when we're feelin' the pangs of hunger, then will be time to cast about for pervision. By scrimpin' a leetle, we can keep up a day or two anyhow. I've known old Patience, my mare there, and Humility, my dorg here, to go without a mouthful of anything for a week; and whenever starvation war starin' us in the face, the Triangle found it easier to whoop a hundred red-skins than when we'd a full stomach. Hunger adds to one's vim and desperashin. But, look here, boys, do ye see that Ingin top-knot 'bove that rock to the north of the blasted pine?"

All answered in the affirmative.

Dan dropped his head, ran his eye down the barrel of his rifle and pressed the trigger. As the weapon rung out, a yell of agony came down from the top of the bluff, and to the surprise of the rangers they saw a form in savage raiment spring into the air, then pitch forward, and, heels over head, go tumbling and crashing down the steep inclination, and plunge into the river.

"You salted that red-skin," said Ben Marcy.

The savage sunk from view when he plunged into the river, and although the rangers watched closely for the appearance of the body, they were disappointed; it did not rise to the surface.

"That's kind o' queerish," said Dan, "that that critter don't come to the surface. Shouldn't wonder if thar wa'n't some trick 'bout that lofty tumblin' down that hill."

"Bow-wow—brew!" barked Humility, drawing the attention of the party up-stream where the view was obstructed by the buildings.

"By the holy smoke of sacrifice!" exclaimed old Dan; "do you see that?"

The form of a man in Indian garments with head and face concealed in a perfect mass of tangled vines and aquatic plants, sprung suddenly out of the water upon the island and sought shelter from Indian bullets behind the row of buildings that flanked the east shore of the island.

"Halt, thar, you confounded water-rat you!" yelled old Dan; "who be you? what d'ye want here?"

"Hold up on dat tongue ob your'n, Massa 'Coaty Dan," was the reply, and the speaker tore aside the wet mass that enveloped his head, and revealed the black face and grinning white teeth of an African.

"Who in the old scratch be you, anyway?"

"Why, Massa Dan, don't you 'member dis nigger? Don't you 'member dat Bess mare ob mine what you book rite out ob be robbers' team? Lord, child, don't you—"

"Great Jehovah! it's that niggero—that Snowball, as I'm a born sinner! Mighty Moses, niggero! we left you deader'n ole Julia Caesar t'other night! Give me your hand, you black imp, and b'lieve me you come like Lazarus of old, for I s'posed a hundred wolves had died eatin' of your black hide. How are you, anyhow, Mr. Snowflake? Whar ye been? whar ye going?"

"Golly, Massa Dan, I's gwine right here. Didn't you see dis nigger come a-bouncin' on his head down dat hill! Dat war me, and I jist dive under de water and swim like a mud-hen 'long de bottom, and come right out here."

"Judea! did I ever?"

"De Ingins come mos' awful nigh killin' me t'other night, and as dey'd taken off mos' all my clothes, I took de duds off a dead Ingin and struck out in s'arch ob my Bess mare, and here I be."

"Well, I'll be condemned if this don't beat me. But how near did I come hittin' you, niggero?" said Dan.

"Half a mile, I guess; heard a bullet whizz through de air somewhar; mis'ble poor shot, 'Coaty Dan'."

"It must 'a' been; I don't see how it is. I aimed to bore a hole right through your top-knot, and s'posed I had done so. Sich shootin's unworthy a member of the Triangle."

"Gosh! den you's mad 'cause you missed, eh?"

"Ahem! well, niggero, I'm glad to meet you. But I don't perpose to make another blunderin' shot."

The young rangers could not suppress an outburst of laughter at Dan's momentary confusion; but a shot from the hill called attention of all to the dangers that menaced them.

All day were they closely besieged by the Indians and their white allies, and not until the dusk of evening began to gather did they dare venture from their cover. When the deepening shadows had blended all in darkness, they made preparations for passing the night. They led their horses to water at the upper side of the island, refreshed themselves from their stock of rations, then posted guards at different points around them.

In one of the cabins, whose roof and walls were in a good state of preservation, a fire was kindled, for the night was chilly, and the mist from the river made the air heavy and damp.

Dakota Dan, with his dog at his heels, scouted around the island as though apprehensive of danger. The old ranger trusted solely to his dog's instinct for notice of approaching enemies, and in doing so it was with a feeling of perfect safety.

The rangers in the cabin discussed the situation in tones that were in sympathy with their feelings. The fate of Idaho Tom had weighed heavily upon their minds, and the future now seemed to threaten them with increasing dangers. They really had little hopes of ever finding Tom, and but for the Princess Aree, they would have given up the pursuit since the supposed death of Kit Bandy. But, somehow or other, a faint spark of hope found nourishment in the belief that the maiden would intercede for Tom, and perchance effect his escape, should he be carried a prisoner to the robber stronghold.

In the midst of their conversation they were interrupted by the sound of old Dan's voice in conversation with some one outside.

A man in a canoe had descended the river and touched upon the upper side of the island. Dan had challenged him, and received the answer:

"I am a friend—Captain Sebley, of General Custer's exploring party."

"The deuce, you say?" answered Dan. "Well, captain, walk into the hut and give an account of yourself."

Dan conducted the man into the cabin, and introduced him to the rangers as Captain Sebley.

The captain was a tall, fine-looking man, with a keen eye and ponderous black beard. He was dressed in the uniform of a captain of cavalry, over which he wore a dark blue military cloak that reached almost to his heels. He threw open his cloak as he entered the cabin, revealing a pair of silver-mounted revolvers, a saber and sash.

Soon as Dan had introduced him, he took his dog and went back to his watch on the margin of the island.

"Captain Sebley," said Darcy Cooper, "I am surprised to see you here at this time."

"No doubt of it, sir," said the captain, in a bluff yet affable tone that at once won the confidence of the boys, "but I know I am devilish glad to surprise you. I've been separated from

the command two days, and am yet a day behind. My horse gave out yesterday, and I was compelled to take it afoot. But to-day I ran across a young Indian coming down the river in a boat, and so I hired passage with him, and he having landed me on this island, went ashore to wait for me. Have you fellows seen any thing of Custer's command?"

"It was encamped within ten miles of here last night," answered Darcy Cooper—"they went south."

"It's devilish queer they don't send a party back after me; but then, I presume they think I'm able to take care of myself," said the captain. "But, boys, what appears to be your object in this confounded old desolate ruin?"

"We're cornered here by a gang of outlaw Indians and white renegades and they've been making it warm for us."

"Indeed? Why, I never dreamed of the like!" exclaimed Sebley, with a slight start. "I've met a hundred Indians the past two days and they all vie with each other in doing me honors, confound the greasy louts."

"Your uniform is a passport through this country, captain; but woe to the unlucky whites that come not in blue," said Cooper.

The captain laughed in an easy, good-natured sort of a way.

"Then if such is the case, you had better adopt me as your Moses to deliver you out of your troubles and this land of Philistines," he said, a smile upon his face.

"We would willingly do so were we not in search of our leader, Idaho Tom, who is a prisoner in the hands of the outlaws up among these hills somewhere."

"You speak of outlaws; do you really believe a band of such characters exists in these hills?"

"I do," affirmed Cooper; "in fact, we know it, for we have had one or two fights with them. They are under one Prairie Paul."

Captain Sebley stroked his long, glossy whiskers as he gazed reflectively into the fire at his feet.

"Prairie Paul—I have heard of him," he said, as if speaking to himself, "but always supposed he was a myth, as I have never met any one before that knew him positively. But if such is the case, I'll have to look out, for robbers may not respect my blue."

"I think your blue will carry you right through, captain, even among them."

"By George! I hope so," Sebley answered; "then I presume it is as you say; they would invoke the closest search of the military should they make away with me, and so endanger their situation."

"Guess, boys, we'd better press the captain into our service a few days," said Ben Marcy; "Uncle Sam can spare him a short time. What say you, captain?"

"I dare say, boys," replied the officer, "that I can effect terms with your enemies without the least trouble whatever; and as I'm not likely to overtake the command soon, I would just as lief give you my assistance and influence as to leave you here to be butchered."

"We will be under everlasting obligations to you if you will do so, captain," said young Cooper, "though I can not ask a man to risk his life and position for me."

"Tut, tut, young man," replied the officer, "I owe kindness to my fellow-men as well as my country. If you say that you will place yourselves under my protection, I'll give the red-skins to understand that I am escorting you off their reservation."

"That'll do," said Marcy; "but what about Captain Tom? We can not give him up."

"I dare say the Indians know where he is; and if alive, I'll have him brought forth," said the officer.

"If you think you can have that influence with the red-skins, I think we will adopt you as our flag of truce," young Cooper remarked, facetiously.

"All right, boys," the captain replied; "in the morning we will set forth, though I will see the red-skins first."

While this conversation was going on inside, the young Indian, who had landed the captain on the island, paddled over to the west shore, and in the course of ten or fifteen minutes returned. He landed on the island, beached his canoe, then with a slow, hesitating footstep approached the cabin.

Dan kept a close watch upon his movements. He approached the door and glanced cautiously around until his eyes rested upon the face of Captain Sebley.

"Hullo, my grim Sharon," the captain exclaimed; "what would you have, my boy?"

"Sojers—that many," and he held up two fingers, "over there—hunt for pale-face friend—me tell 'em dat one sojerman here—they send that," and he handed the captain a folded slip of paper; on the back of which was written: "To Captain Sebley, if on the island, if not to the one in command there."

Captain Sebley read it aloud, then burst into a peal of laughter.

"The boys are back looking for me," he said, "and have got track of me some way or other. I'll read the note and see what they have to offer."

He read as follows, in a clear, distinct tone:

"CAPTAIN SEBLEY, if you are on that island, let us know, for we are getting tired looking for you. If no such person is there, the leader, or any one of the party encamped thereon, will confer a favor by informing us of the fact at your first convenience. Yours, etc.,

"LIEUTENANT GREGORY"

"Well, I'll have to answer this in person," said the captain, dropping the paper into the fire, and rising to his feet.

"Then this is likely to spoil our arrangement, isn't it?" said Darcy Cooper.

"Not at all; we will not leave you, rest assured, and I will report soon again. I may, while ashore, obtain an interview with your enemies; and if so, I shall demand the surrender of your friend, if they have him."

"Act your pleasure, captain," answered Cooper, as the officer turned and moved away.

A momentary silence followed the captain's departure; then the rangers began discussing the promising prospect before them. While thus engaged, Darcy Cooper seated himself before the fire and gazed reflectively into the cheery blaze. Ben Marcy noticed the expression that came over his face, the working of the muscles, and the vague, far-off look of the eye; and he wondered what thoughts the warm glow of the blaze conjured up in his mind—whether some familiar faces—the associations of the home fireside, were recalled to his youthful mind. And Ben was suddenly started by the change that flashed over his young friend's face. Cooper's lips parted; he started to his feet, exclaiming aloud, as he pointed to the flame at his feet:

"Great God, boys! I have read a terrible secret in that fire! Look!—read it for yourselves!"

CHAPTER XXXVII

DAKOTA DAN RECONNOITERS.

"WHAT is it, Darcy?" asked the young man's companions, started by his sudden excitement.

"Do you see the ashes of that paper dropped in the flames by Captain Sebley?" he asked.

All answered in the affirmative, for there upon the coals at the edge of the fire lay the charred remains of the paper. The latter had not been consumed by the blaze, but, lying upon the red coals, had charred to a blackish gray color, preserving its form in whole; and upon this sheet of ashes every word that had been written thereon could be distinctly traced in white lines!

"And do you see those letters upon it?" Cooper asked.

All looked closely and again answered in the affirmative.

"By heavens! that Captain Sebley is an impostor, or else he lied to us regarding the contents of that slip of paper," said Cooper.

An exclamation burst from every lip, then all gathered to examine the contents of the burned paper.

Darcy Cooper dropped upon his knees, and shading his eyes from the glare of the fire, said:

"Now listen, and I will read from the ashes of that paper the words upon it."

Slowly he read these words:

"CAPTAIN—I have ten of the boys and thirty Indians here awaiting your order. How shall the island be reached?—or can you draw them out of their defense?"

PROMPT."

Again an exclamation burst from the lips of the astonished rangers.

"By gracious! that Captain Sebley is an impostor!"

"Hal hal hal!" came a strange, shrill laugh from near the door, and the next moment a queer, strange specimen of humanity appeared from the darkness and paused in the doorway.

The stranger was a man, a little above medium height, with a thin, sharp face, innocent of beard as a woman's. A slouched hat shaded the eyes and most of the face; and his form was wrapped and girded in a manner that gave him the general appearance of a first-class vagabond.

"Who in Satan's name are you?" exclaimed one of the rangers.

"Hal hal hal!" the man continued, laughing in the peculiar rollicking strain that is bound to set an auditor into a roar, despite his efforts to appear grave; "I really thought you young curmudgeons would git your eyes wide open," he said, shaking his long, bony fingers at the boys.

"Well, now, who are you, old bandyshanks?" asked one of the rangers, astonished at sight of this new arrival.

"Ho, ho, ho," chuckled the man, rubbing his hands with glee, as he advanced into the cabin and glanced from face to face; "it's no difference who I be—I'm no flag of truce, let me tell ye. Hoss-fly! that's purty good—Captain Sebley; ahem!—lost from the command chasing buffalo; ahem!—hired an Ingin boy to paddle him down the stream; ahem!—going to be your Moses and take you to the promised land—oh—hum!—fine, nice, delicious, humane, grandiloquent Captain Sebley!—bully Captain Sebley—hal hal hal!" and the man's form became convulsed with laughter.

He stood in the twilight where the light and shadows blended, and his words were spoken rapidly and accompanied with appropriate gestures that rendered him an object of queer interest.

"What do you know about Sebley?" demanded Marcy.

"Hoss-fly and nettles! what do I know 'bout the old scratch? what do I know 'bout the science of minerology?—phlebotomy?—what do I know about anything, why don't you ask? What do ye take me for?—a bear? a jassack? a ranga-tang?—a hyetus? or an old fool?"

"It's hard to tell," answered Cooper, growing impatient.

"It is?—well, I'm Ichabod Flea, and I know whereof I speak when I say that Captain Sebley is no other than that gay old cockalorum, Prairie Paul, of the Gold Hills! If he ar'n't, eat me, hoss-fly. So you can act accordin', and charge the same to my account, for I'm off like a lark in the gray of the rosy morn."

Before one of the boys could reply, Ichabod Flea disappeared like a shadow. The boys followed him out and down to the edge of the island, but before they could arrest his flight he jumped into his canoe and paddled away down the river.

Dakota Dan came up about this time and said:

"That's an odd ole genius, but he's no fool, boys; I had a talk with him afore I let him go into the cabin. That's a good joke Captain Sebley is playing; and it's queer that I didn't recognize Prairie Paul. But we'll be ready for 'im."

"It may be that the redoubtable Ichabod Flea is an enemy also," said Darcy, "and were it not for the words upon the burnt paper, I would take his word no sooner than Sebley's, confound the traitors!"

"I'll tell ye, boys," said Dan, "I'm going ashore to reconnoiter a leetle. I want to know more about this than I do; I'd like to see whar Mr. Flea hops to. I have fished that dugout out of the sand round here, and will go over in it."

"It will be rather a dangerous adventure, Dan," said young Marcy, "and I hope we will not lose you."

"I know it, but that's what the Triangle likes, so now keep a clus watch all around till I git back."

Without further words, Dan walked to where the dugout lay on the beach, and with the assistance of the boys launched it and embarked for the northern shore. He soon effected a landing, and as no one appeared to dispute his way, he pushed back into the woods a few rods and stopped to listen.

All was silent. He kept back some fifty rods from the river, for he knew that if danger was near, it would be along the shore.

He moved on for nearly a mile, then bent his course westward and struck off among the hills. He had not gone over half a mile ere the reflection of a light far in advance attracted his attention and enlisted his curiosity. He quickened his footsteps, and in the course of a few minutes drew up on a ledge overlooking the camp of a party of Indians and outlaws. Here repeated surprises met his gaze. As he ran his eyes over the assembly, some of whom were standing, some sitting, and some reclining, he picked out the form of Prairie Paul in his late disguise of Captain Sebley. But if he was surprised when he saw the form of the outlaw chief, he was completely astounded when he saw the familiar face and form of Kit Bandy seated among the crowd, as well, apparently, as he ever was in his life, and enjoying perfect freedom of the camp.

Dan ground his teeth with rage, for it flashed through his mind in an instant that Kit had not been wounded, but had made use of a glaring falsehood to enable him to return to his old associates—the robbers. He was sorely tempted to draw a bead upon the villain and put an end to his existence; but before he could carry his thought into execution, his mind was diverted from his purpose.

After some mental deliberation, Dan rose and started back to the island, undecided as to what he should do. He knew it would not have been good policy to have shot either Kit or Prairie Paul, for this would only have added to the cruelty and vengeance of their followers, and made the possibility of rescuing Idaho Tom still more hopeless.

The old ranger did not return by the road he came, but cut across the valley toward the island. His way lay through a densely-wooded district, where the darkness was almost impenetrable; but he kept his bearings well, and knew about where he would strike the river. As he hurried along, noiselessly as a shadow, the sharp tinkle of a bell suddenly smote his ears, a light flashed into his face, and a shrill, sharp voice screamed through the dismal, gloomy night.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE WRONGED WIFE.

THE day was near its close. Only the distant mountain peaks reflected the blaze of the setting sun, while low in the valleys the shadows lurked like assassins, and the dismal voices of night were heard issuing, as it were, from out the realms of Nowhere.

Down from among the shadows of the Western hills, into the valley of the Powder river, a horse and rider came plodding along. The horse was a sorry-looking old creature, and the rider was a woman—a fit companion for the animal she rode.

She was a white woman, tall and angular, with sharp, black eyes and thin, shrewish face. Her hair was of fiery red color, and being parted in the middle, was combed close upon the forehead. She wore a dress of faded blue linsey-woolsey that fit her form rather slovenly. A sort of pea-jacket and a sun-bonnet, minus the paste-boards, completed the dress of this singular-looking female.

Her horse was loaded with as many bundles and packs as a Saratoga belle, and she rode along as quietly smoking a clay pipe, grim with the blackness of age, as though she were not hundreds of miles from civilization and in the midst of untold dangers.

When about a mile from the river, she drew rein and dismounted; unpacked her animal and turned it loose with as much ease and business tact as though she had been accustomed to the lonely life of the border, and felt no uneasiness nor fear of the surrounding solitude.

From her movements it was plain enough that she was going into camp. From a bundle she produced a hatchet and

trimmed the limbs from the body of a straight sapling, which she then used as the central pole for a tent. She took a large canvas and tied it around the slender bush some six feet from the ground; then she drew it out at the bottom in the shape of a cone, fastening the edges down by means of hard wooden pins previously provided for that purpose, and her lodge was completed.

She now moved her effects into the structure, and from a bundle took a ball of twine, one end of which she attached to a sapling about three feet from the ground. Then she walked backward in a circle around the tent, and about twenty feet from it, paying out the ball as she went and now and then twining it once around a bush or twig. She went on around until she reached the place of starting, when she fastened the string to the first bush again, thus completely encircling the tent. She next carried the remainder of the string to the apex of the tent and run it down inside. Three other strings were then attached to the encircling cord, and carried to the top of the tent and ran through to the inside, as the first. Then gathering these four pendant ends together, she attached them to a small silver bell of a clear, sharp tone.

A look of satisfaction now flitted over her face—evidence that all arrangements for the night had been completed; and so she sat down, and from a carpet-bag took some provisions and a flask of wine, and then partook of a hearty supper.

By the time her repast had been completed it was quite dark, and so she lit a tiny dark lantern and examined a brace of fine-looking revolvers; and then with lantern closed, and revolvers at her side, she finally lay down to rest. Hours wore away, and the night advanced. All was silent as the grave around this strange, fearless woman's lonely tent. Even her horse, that stood near, seemed imbued with the spirit of silence, for he stood as still as a rock.

Suddenly, however, as the night wore on, the tinkle of the bell suspended overhead in the tent, rung out a warning note. In an instant the woman was upon her feet with lantern and revolvers in hand. She peered out; all was dark as pitch, but she could hear the approach of footsteps. Some one was near—had run against the encircling cord and caused the bell to be rung. There was no denying the warning of approaching danger—the device of warning was as unerring as it was cunning.

The intruder came near the tent—the woman stepped out, flashed open the lantern into his face and leveled a revolver full upon his breast.

"Stand, midnight prowler! stand or die!"

"Great mortality! a female woman's voice, as I'm born!" replied the man, at whose heels growled a ferocious dog.

"Yes, I be a woman, skulking wretch—disturber of sweet repose; and I s'posed the virgin solitude of this place uncon-taminated by the presence of treacherous man."

"Bless my soul, ma'am, you 'pear to be down on the men folks," replied the man, who was none other than Dakota Dan, the ranger.

"Down on them!" she replied, contemptuously, "I hate the very earth they walk on, the miserable trash."

"I've an ijee," said Dan, "that you've been jilted, ole gal."

"Don't insult me, debominable wretch, or I'll plug you through. I can shoot, and, lone, unprotected female that I be, I'll show you that I can resent an insult."

"Beg pardon, ma'am," said Dan, graciously. "But it would afford me sublime pleasure to know who you be."

"Man's inquisitiveness!" sneered the woman. "I'd die dead in my tracks afore I'd tell you my name. Please gracious, I have a mind and a will of my own, and whenever you catch Sabina Bandy—there! confounded old fool that I be, I've let it out."

"Sabina Bandy!" exclaimed Dan, in astonishment; "great Judea! I wish I had a dollar for every time I've heard that name."

"You heard my name? Who be you, old tramp?"

"Dakota Dan."

"And you've heard my name, ch! Well, please gracious, I think I'm on a trail again."

"Yes; I've heard Kit Bandy speak of you a million times, or more," said Dan, "with tears in his eyes."

"Blessed stars!" exclaimed the woman. "I think my journey is nigh an end. I'm after that man, Kit Bandy, ow-dacious, low-lived wrecker of female happiness. He's my husband, Mr. Dakota Dan; he won my heart in its childish innocence, wed me, and then, great monster that he is, deserted me—left me weepin', sad and lonely, with a crushed and bleeding heart. But, please gracious, I rallied from my brokenheartedness and determined to find that old heathen if I had to ransack creation over and under. I struck the destroyer of female happiness's trail a month ago among the hills, and now, Mr. Dan, if you know any thing 'bout him, just let it out, and receive the blessings of a wronged and innocent woman."

"Your husband is not over a mile from here."

"Hallelujah!" exclaimed the woman in an ecstasy of joy, "if you wer'n't a man, I'd embrace you with woman's tenderness for this news. Joyful tidings! I just want to get my eyes on that ongrateful man—my fingers in his hair, and then I'll be content to die."

"Ole woman, seems to me I've heard your voice before," said Dan.

"No doubt you've heard the echoes of a broken heart like mine; but, sir, if you will lead me to that ongrateful man, I'll speak a good word for you in heaven when the angels come for me."

"You mean it, fair lady; but I doubt your ever don'in'

angel's wings; howsumever, your husband is a captive in the power of a gang of robbers."

"Merciful man!" she exclaimed, somewhat surprised and disappointed by the news; but gradually recovering her composure, continued: "but then it don't make any difference; I'll wade through blood and fire to git at that man. Dakota Dan, will you do a noble, yet deserted woman, a favor? lead me to the presence of him who promised, at the altar, to love, cherish and protect me from harm and the adversity of the world?"

"I will," answered Dan, his face aglow with pleasure. "I'll do it," he continued to himself, "just for the furious fun of the thing. Heavens! won't thar be a report when they come together."

The woman went into the tent and in a moment returned and announced her readiness to start for the robber-camp.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

A CONJUGAL WELCOME.

ALL was comparatively quiet in the robber-camp in which Kit Bandy had been seen by Dakota Dan. Old Kit, himself, seemed an objective point against which harsh anathemas and curses were hurled; for there was one thing connected with his presence in the outlaw camp that Dan had overlooked; Kit was a prisoner—his feet and legs being securely bound. The fact, however, of his hands being free is what led to this oversight. Moreover, old Kit seemed to be enjoying his usual exuberance of spirit and perfect freedom of his tongue, which Dan did not suppose would be tolerated from any but a friend.

Kit had not been wounded at the time he and Dan became separated, but he had affected a *role* in order to get into the camp of his former friends. His object in this was the release of Idaho Tom, and all worked well until the outlaws got him to the light, when they discovered that he was not injured at all; and, mistrusting his purpose, they made him prisoner before he could escape.

Kit tried to argue them out of their suspicions, and to restore himself to his former place in their confidence. But, he could no longer work upon their credulity; and every assertion was rebuked with an oath or a contradiction.

"Gentlemen, partners of many a day," he finally said, "if I can not convince you of my good faith, time will. There's a day for reckoning, and then you'll see, boys, how the land lays with me. I've been a martyr all my days to the injustice of humanity. When I lived with old Sabina, my wife, she led me an awful life, and if I hadn't got away when I did, my mind 'd been fogged long before—"

"You got away, but, please heavens, you'll not do it again!" screamed a voice, in which all the pent-up fury of a wild, maddened tigress burst forth like a Vesuvius, and a form sprung out of the darkness, shot across the area between the woods and fire and came down upon Kit Bandy like a hawk upon a bird.

It was the woman—Sabina Bandy.

"Oh, great horn of Joshua! save me! save me, boys!" cried Kit, "'tis her—she—Sabina—the demoness!"

"Stars alive, you old essence of cussedness!" the ogress fairly hissed. "I'll tear you bald, you deceivin', ongrateful hound," and she buried her claws in his hair, and fairly danced as she pulled and tugged at the helpless prisoner's scraggy locks.

The outlaws rushed forward to interfere, but, seeing how the matter stood, they fell back and became delighted witnesses of this conjugal reunion.

Kit hollowed and begged manfully; Sabina fairly cried with rage—the spirit of vengeance; the outlaws roared with laughter and the woods resounded with all.

And from his concealment in the woods, Dakota Dan also witnessed the whole, his sides shaking and the tears running down his face, so overpowered was he with suppressed laughter and merriment.

The old tergitant finally became tired of her violent demonstrations, and stopped for breath.

She glanced slowly and cautiously around her like a tigress looking for a new victim. Her eyes snapped, her face was flushed, and her breath came quick and short.

"Gentlemen," she finally said, addressing the outlaws, "you may laugh and laugh till purgatory freezes over for all I, Sabina Bandy, cares. That man there is my lawful, wedded husband—the miserable wretch who once knelt at my feet and swore by all that was sacred that he loved me. I, a young and thoughtless girl, believed him. He won my heart and hand and then—oh, then! he deserted me. But, please gracious, I have him now, and I'm bound to have my satisfaction. I'll maul the infernal meanness out of him. Behold me, gentlemen," she said, striking a tragic air, "the wreck of former beauty—boo-hoo! it's too much to think about! Give me a blanket and I'll smother the destroyer of maiden beauty and innocence to death!"

She sprung toward an Indian warrior, and with one sweep, tore the heavy woolen blanket from his shoulders; and catching it with extended hands, rushed toward Kit with it outspread as if to cover him. But she stopped short as she passed the fire, and with a sudden movement, spread the blanket over the fire, wrapping all in perfect gloom.

For a moment all stood mute with astonishment; the smell of the greasy blanket spread on the air, and a silence like death

reigned. Then Prairie Paul sprung forward, and seizing the blanket by a corner, jerked it off the fire. The light flared out. A cry burst from the lips of the outlaws—a fierce, savage yell of baffled triumph thrilled through the night.

Kit Bandy and his amiable spouse had vanished from view—had escaped into the woods during the momentary darkness that hung over the camp!

CHAPTER XL.

THE CRY OF AN INFANT.

DAKOTA DAN had been an eye-witness to the whole scene of infelicity that had resulted in the deliverance of Kit Bandy from the power of the outlaws, and none were more surprised over the result of the meeting of the husband and wife than was the old borderman himself.

When the amiable Sabina left Dan near the outlaw camp, she made a request of him that he should await the result of her interview with Kit. Why it was that she should make this request, he could not comprehend, but no sooner did he see that they had escaped than something of the truth flashed across his mind; and before he had much time for conjecture, the sound of approaching feet drew his attention aside.

"Dan! Dan!" a hurried voice suddenly called out near him.

"What?" answered Dan.

"Git out of this, ole man, if you don't want to git nabbed. Come along with us. I've got the old runaway scratch, and I'll die afore I take my hands off him, true as my name's Sabina Bandy."

Dan now recognized the voice as that of Sabina, and at once started away after them.

They moved rapidly, and yet silently. Not a word was spoken by either of the party until the tent was reached; then Sabina turned to Dan, and said:

"Old gent, this 'ere kentry is very unhealthy for one of your corporosity, and I reckon you'd better trot on to the island, and I'll bundle up and take the old man and rack out for home."

"Bandy," said Dan, sympathetically, "can't you prevail on your gallant half to go down to the island just above the ford and spend the night with us?"

"Dan-yil," said Kit, humbly, "you war never married, I believe you said, therefore you know nothin' o' the—"

"Shet your diatted ole mouth, or I'll baste my hand over it," interrupted Sabina. "You want to git the robbers down here by your loud, fierce talkin'. Old man, mebbe I'll take a notion to come down to the island and spend the night with this old vagrant, so you can go on and say no more to him."

Dan turned and left the twain alone in the depth of the woods. He made his way directly toward the island, and as he reached the river-bank just opposite his friends' retreat, the sound of voices in conversation arrested his attention. He stopped and listened. He recognized one of the voices as that of Captain Sebley, whom, he learned from his conversation, was about embarking for the island.

The old ranger knew at once that the man was about to spring the trap that he believed he had successfully arranged for the capture of Idaho Tom's followers; and he resolved not only to assist in thwarting the villain's plans, but to spring a trap upon him, that might ultimately lead to the restoration of Idaho Tom to his friends. With this object in view, he hurried to where he had left his dug-out, and at once embarked for the island. He landed on the lower side, and of the guard who met him, he learned that Captain Sebley had not yet arrived upon the island.

Hurrying to the cabin, Dan hastily informed his friends of the adventures of the night—of the rescue of Kit Bandy by his wife, and of the proposed visit of Captain Sebley. Then he made a suggestion regarding the captain's visit that at once met the favor of the rangers, and gave them hopes of effecting Tom's rescue.

A moment later, the captain landed on the island, and was conducted to the cabin by the sentinel who met him.

The boys and old Dan greeted his return as though they were in no manner aware of his true character.

"Well, boys," the villain said, "I have had an interview with the Indians, and they have promised you, through me, a safe conduct from their territory."

"That's ginorous in them," said old Dan, edging around until he had placed himself between the man and the door; "and how soon did you tell 'em we'd git outen here?"

"Right away," answered Sebley, stroking his long beard.

There was a momentary silence, then Dan spoke.

"Captain, it 'pears to me that we've met afore. Didn't I meet you and a passel of fellers on the plain a few days ago?"

"I think not," said the captain, not the least disconcerted.

"Well, now look here, captain, this is dogged thin. I know you jist as well as a book. You needn't think we're asleep, and are goin' to be caught by a robber-chief and scallawag in general. No, sir-ee!"

Sebley started violently. An oath burst from his lips, and with a bound he reached the door. But the rangers were on the alert, and before he could escape he was seized and overpowered. Then old Dan tore aside the disguise and revealed the features of Prairie Paul, the robber-chief.

"You owdashus old skinflint!" exclaimed the ranger, "you

took us for a pack of fools, did ye? thought we war asleep, did ye? didn't know the Triangle war here, did ye?"

Prairie Paul was inclined to make the best of his situation, and take the whole in a very easy and jovial spirit. He interchanged words and jokes with the boys over his almost successful adventure in the garb of Captain Sebley, and indulged in outbursts of laughter when Dan narrated the adventures of Sabina Bandy in the robber-camp. Altogether, Prairie Paul was not a man for whom one would experience a natural aversion, for there was something of the gentleman, as well as the robber and outlaw, about him.

"Well, boys, how's this matter to end?" he finally questioned.

"In death," replied Dan, "unless you have our friend, Idaho Tom, restored to us, and that before long."

"But, suppose this was beyond human power?" said Prairie Paul.

"Then it shall be eye for eye, and tooth for tooth," answered Dan, with a desperate firmness in his tone.

"You're a bitter pill, Dakota Dan," said the prisoner.

Before Dan could answer, a figure darkened the doorway. It was the form of the stranger, Ichabod Flea.

"Hullo, Mr. Flea," exclaimed Dan, "you're back, are ye?"

"Don't you see I be?" was the laconic answer; "but I see that you have got a prisoner. Well, well; verily the mills of the gods grind slowly, and so forth. Now that man is the redoubtable Prairie Paul—*alias* Whitelaw Maffitt, who's wanted in more than one court of justice."

Prairie Paul started violently, and he searched the face of Ichabod Flea with a look of uneasiness. He seemed to take relief from the fact of his not recognizing the man.

"Great horn that blew down old Jericho!" suddenly broke upon the ears of the party, and the distressed, comical-looking face of Kit Bandy was thrust in at the door.

Dakota Dan burst into a peal of laughter.

"She brought you down, did she, Bourbon?" he asked.

"Brought nothin'," was Kit's reply; "but, see here, Dan-yil, if you'll jist keep still 'bout that matter I'll be much obleeged to you."

"I'll do it, Kit, if you'll jist tell me whar she be."

"In purgatory, I reckon," answered Kit.

Dan again went off into a fit of rollicking laughter.

"Horn of Joshua!" exclaimed Kit, when his eyes fell upon Prairie Paul, "have they got you salted, Captain Paul?"

Prairie Paul answered with a furious oath, for upon Kit Bandy he now placed all blame of his defeat and capture. He accused him of treachery, and even went so far as to threaten him.

"Mr. Maffitt," said Kit, "you need not waste words of threat on me. You are now the prisoner of myself and Ichabod Flea. We, sir, are government detectives, and for years have been hunting up and delivering to justice just such overland robbers as you and others have been. If I did volunteer in your service, you can not attach crime to my name. I did it in furtherance of my work as a detective, and what I have learned of robber-life will enable me to purge the hills of every band."

"Curse your old skin, you are not out of this," replied Prairie Paul, fiercely.

"Oh, well, we'll not quarrel about that, Maffitt. I never quarrel with my prisoners," answered Kit.

"Remember, gentlemen," said Paul, his face aglow with inward triumph, "that one of your men is alone in my power."

"You allude to Idaho Tom?" said Darcy Cooper.

"I do," replied the villain, a Satanic smile upon his face.

"We'll see 'bout that, captain," answered Kit. "It strikes me that I've struck a trail that leads among the hills; and jist as soon as Dakota Dan-yil and Ichabod Flea are ready to sally forth with me, we'll go to Idaho Thomas' rescue."

"Great Judeal I'm ready this minnit," replied Dan.

"And here, too," added Ichabod.

"Then let us embark at once, for this is the time for us to work," said Kit Bandy.

Preparations for departure were therefore made. The rangers were given charge of the island and prisoner, and cautioned against the tricks and stratagems of the enemy on either shore of the river.

The trio embarked in Prairie Paul's canoe, and dropped silently down the river at the will of the current. Not one of them spoke a word. Kit sat at the stern and guided the boat. A dense fog hung over the stream. The darkness was impenetrable to human eye. There was no wind, and the swash of the river was the only sound that greeted their ears.

The minds of the trio were busy during their silent descent of the river, and none more so than that of Dakota Dan. He was thinking of Kit Bandy, the man before him—of his interview with General Custer, his captivity and his release by his wife, Sabina. Then arose the question: "How had Kit escaped from his wife? Where was she? Had he murdered her?" The thought sent a shudder through his whole frame, and he was on the eve of expressing his feelings.

The dip of oars coming up the river suddenly arrested the attention of all. They listened intently. A boat was ascending the stream; it would pass within a few paces of them.

Clutching their weapons, the three awaited the approach of the canoe.

Just as it came alongside, the paddles ceased their movement. The occupants had discovered the approach of the other canoe, and one of them put out a hand. It came in contact with Dakota Dan's face, but was quickly withdrawn.

"Who be you?" demanded Dan, involuntarily.

"Ugh! pale-face friend," was the response.

"You're a cussed red-skin," answered Dan, and his words were accompanied with the click of a revolver.

"Don't shoot! don't shoot! kill baby!" exclaimed the Indian, in a pleading, whimpering tone.

"Kill what?" sternly questioned Dan.

As if in answer to his interrogative, the tiny wail of an infant broke upon their ears.

CHAPTER XLI.

A BABY IN CAMP.

THE three men were completely astonished by the sound that broke upon their ears. It was no deception, they knew, but the unmistakable cry of a young infant, half-smothered in a bundle of wraps. For a moment they sat almost speechless, Kit being the first to break the silence.

"What's your name, red-skin?" he asked.

"Qadocq," answered the Indian, timidly.

"Ah! a French half-breed," added Kit; "but what's that you've got there?"

"Squaw, and two papoos."

"Indeed? well, where you going?"

"Up river."

"So I perceive; but to what point?"

"The island—spend night there—then go on way off."

"Precactly," said Kit, "but I believe you ort to have an escort from here, and so one of us'd better see that you reach the island."

After some conversation, Dakota Dan concluded to accompany the half-breed and his family to the island, and rising to his feet, stepped into their canoe, and the next moment both boats were in motion—Kit and Ichabod continuing on down the stream, while Dan and the half-breed pushed slowly toward the island.

The Indian became somewhat sullen, and betrayed some disdain at the mistrust of the whites. The woman remained perfectly quiet aside from a low, whispered lullaby to one of the babes that was uneasy and restless.

They finally reached the island and landed. Qadocq was considerably surprised to find the place already occupied; but without the least hesitation they followed Dan to the cabin, the man carrying his rifle and a number of packs and blankets, and the woman the two children—one tied up in a shawl and strapped to her back in the true Indian style, while the other she carried in a long willow basket.

The rangers were not a little surprised at the presence of the family there at that time of night, and for a moment the greatest curiosity was manifested. Dan, however, set all at ease by explaining the circumstances under which they met, and how they came to be there.

Qadocq was a young man—possibly not over twenty-five, and though he maintained a morose silence, there was nothing at all repulsive about his features. His wife was several years his junior, and almost white. She was rather pretty, with dark hair and eyes, and a shy, timid look.

There was nothing mean about either of their garbs, and altogether they were rather a respectable-looking couple of French half-breeds.

The woman deposited the baby in the basket in one corner, then removed the other from her back and hung it in a kind of a hammock against the wall.

The rangers were considerably disconcerted by their new guests, especially the babies. Old Dan, however, seemed unusually pleased, and whenever the baby in the basket cried out, as it frequently did, his eyes sparkled as only those of an old man, whose soul felt the power and innocence of childhood, could.

"By the smoke of the temple!" the old fellow exclaimed, gleefully rubbing his horny palms, "that sounds delicious, boys—that baby cry. I tell ye, I like—yes, love the little rose-buds, boys. That's more of heaven in a baby's eyes than a dozen sermons. It reminds me of when I war a chile myself, of home, my ole mother, and of innocence, for, of such is the kingdom of heaven."

The baby in the hammock slept quietly, but the one in the basket was fretful and feverish. The young mother, already worn and fatigued, rocked the basket and tried to still it.

Dakota Dan, with a smile of tender admiration, advanced, and parting the wraps over the face of the little one in the hammock, gazed upon it. It was sleeping soundly, and a dusky little cherub it was. It could not have been over six months old. From the sleeping babe, Dan went to the one in the basket, and as he bent over it, a cry of surprise burst from his lips. The child was about the same age as the other, but it was white as a lily—it was not the child of the Indian couple. Of this he was positive.

"Why, Qadocq," said Dan, "this is not your chile—it is white. How does it come?"

Both Qadocq and his wife shook their heads.

"No, it white baby," answered the woman.

"But how came you by it?"

"Give us by white people."

"By whom?" questioned Dan.

The man and woman exchanged glances and remained silent.

"Boys," said Dan, aside, "there is some mystery—some wrong about this baby, and these people."

Then Dan turned, and with the mother's permission, lifted the baby from the basket and sat down before the fire. He held it as stiffly and awkwardly, and yet as tenderly in his

arms as though it had been a mere bubble, liable to disappear at the rudest touch. A quaint, confused smile of delight mounted the old man's face, and it was plain to be seen that the touch of the child thrilled his whole frame with a feeling that he had seldom experienced. His features assumed a different expression. They were relieved of the care and suspense, the fear and anxiety so characteristic of the borderman. A radiance, childlike and gentle in its simplicity, beamed upon the tender infant. And the baby, relieved of its cramped position in the basket, seemed to regard the old man with unconscious delight. It was a meeting of the extremes—the old man, bowed down with age, and the child just from the hands of the Creator; and the contrast was such as to arrest the attention of those around, with a feeling serious enough.

The young rangers gathered around Dan, to look at the baby, whose influence in the cabin seemed like that of a charm. The change in his position, and the bright glow of the fire, relieved the child of its fretfulness, and with its big blue eyes watched the dancing shadows on the rude wall, kicked and crowed and flung its chubby fists as though it had never known a moment's pain.

It was a beautiful little creature, with rosy cheeks and dimpled chin, little pug nose and a tempting little mouth from which the rude old borderman did not hesitate to steal a kiss, now and then.

There was one thing about the child that Dan and the boys did not fail to notice; the clothing and wraps were in strange contrast with those of the dusky chub sleeping in the hammock. Some of them were of fine material and made with skill and taste, which convinced the rangers that the child belonged to persons of affluence, and that it had been stolen by the half-breed and his wife, and was being spirited away. His view of the case was strengthened by their refusal to answer any questions regarding it; and so Dan resolved he would not let them leave the island with the child until they had explained away his suspicions in a satisfactory manner.

"Ar'n't he a rosebud of a cherub, boys?" asked old Dan, as, at arm's length, he regarded the little lump of humanity with a look of fond delight and admiration.

Of course all acquiesced in the old man's opinion, and for some time a scene of domestic joy and pleasure was enacted in that old cabin. All forgot the dangers that surrounded them and devoted their attention to the antics and frolicking of the baby and Dakota Dan. The former kicked and crowed, and the latter laughed and talked in the highest glee. The rangers looked on with silent joy. Prairie Paul, too, seemed interested in the baby, for a smile hovered upon his face. The half-breed and his wife sat by, gazing with demure silence into the fire, now and then exchanging glances.

Dakota Dan paid no attention to any one but the baby, over which he seemed transported with delight. His heart, unused to scenes of tenderness, apparently was softened into gentleness, and, like a child, he prattled and played with the infant boy. Now and then a little fist smote the bearded cheek, or little chubby fingers clutched into the scanty beard and pulled until tears ran down the indulgent old ranger's face.

Finally Dan ceased playing with the little one, and said:

"Boys, this is surely a taste of God's sweetest gifts to man; for this is the happiest hour of my life, I do believe. I never thought that war so much sweetness and love in a baby. I don't know that I ever touched one afore, and it makes me feel better, purer and holier. Who wouldn't fight to the death for such a little angel as this? Why, boys, I b'lieve the Triangle could whoop a dozen Ingins in a fair fight if it war to save this baby. Humility, old pup, come here! Look at it, dorg, and pass yer opinion."

Humility walked up to his master's side, thrust his nose against the baby's face, then turned and walked away, with a sullen jealousy.

Old Dan indulged in a hearty fit of laughter.

"The old dorg's jealous as a Spanish *senorita*, but I'll bet he'd fight for the little dumplin', for all that, boys."

Scarcely had he spoken, when a rifle report broke the silence of the moment.

With a fierce bark, Humility lanced out into the darkness, and dashed away across the island.

One rifle report after another followed in rapid succession.

The young rangers seized their weapons and rushed out of the cabin.

Old Dan kissed the baby, dropped it into the basket, and taking up his rifle, followed his young friends out.

A wild, unearthly yell greeted his ears as he emerged from the cabin.

A score or more of robbers and Indians had effected a landing upon the island, and already the horrible tumult of a band-to-hand death-struggle rent the dismal night afar.

"May God protect the baby!" said Dan, in a tone that seemed prophetic; then he joined his friends in the battle.

CHAPTER XLII.

OLD HAGAR'S WAIF.

FOR a while let us leave the rangers, and go down to Menno-vale to look after some who are there.

Major Loomis' party reached home without further trouble, and all were surprised to learn that no one knew of Christie Dorne's abduction. It is true, all were advised that she was

absent from home, but they supposed she had followed the hunting-party along with some others who did not start until the day after the departure of the major's train. The settlers all knew that she had positively refused to accompany the party, but now that she *was* gone, her absence set the gossips to work, for there were gossips in Menno-vale, notwithstanding the Mennonite disbelief in original sin and their otherwise peaceful proclivities. Human nature was the same there as elsewhere, and as it was generally known that the wealthy cattle-owner, Mr. Adam Farwell, had been paying his respects to Christie, all believed that she had imprudently followed up the party to be near her lover.

None were firmer in this conviction than was Miss Judith Royce. Miss Judith was an American girl of American parents, but who had embraced the Mennonite faith, years before. Her father had been led into this religious belief in order to escape the draft during the Rebellion. Miss Judith was a vain, pretty girl of about twenty summers, whose matrimonial ambition had always made love an object secondary to wealth; and, as Adam Farwell was the only young man in the settlement upon whom she could fix her attentions, a spirit of jealous rivalry sprung up between her and Christie. Not rivalry either, but envious jealousy, for Christie didn't care the snap of her finger for Farwell. Still no one could have convinced Judith of the fact. She was firm in her belief that Christie loved Adam and was exerting every effort known to woman to drag him into her power. And on the other hand, Judith strove still harder to win him away from her, and no sooner did she learn that Christie had left home to join the hunting-party, as all believed, than her indignation and consuming jealousy drove her almost distracted.

Judith cast about her for a friend to whom she could look for sympathy, and could think of no one unless it was aunt Hagar Cummings, a veritable old gossip and mischief-maker, yet withal a kind-hearted and valuable neighbor. Aunt Hagar was of French extraction, and had once been married to an Indian chief, by whom she had one or two children. After the death of her red-skin husband, she was married to Mr. Cummings, a kind, easy, honest old Pennsylvania Dutchman.

The Cummings' lived about a mile from the main settlement, and thither Judith made her way. She found aunt Hagar all alone at her knitting, humming a lullaby to a rosy-faced little boy-baby that reposed in a cradle before her.

"Why, Judith, darling!" the old woman exclaimed, resting her knitting upon her knee, "I am so glad you thought enough of me to come up and see me while the old man war away. I git so lonesome here alone."

"With this little darling to keep you company?" replied Judith, rushing to the cradle and kissing the baby until it was almost smothered.

"Oh, a little chit like that's lots of company, it's true, but then ole folks like me wants some one to talk to and talk."

"I know jist how you feel, aunt Hagar; I have felt so myself; but, aunt Hagar, have you heard the latest news?"

"Why, no!" exclaimed the old woman, as if started with horror. "I haven't heard nothin'; I sit here from morning till night and don't see nor hear anybody. It's a good thing I'm not inclined to gossip, or I'd die for want of an opportunity to hear and tell stories. But what is it, Judith, dear?"

"Why, that impudent Christie Dorne has follered the hunters. She slipped away unknown to any of us."

"Mercy heavens! you don't say?" cried the old woman.

"It's a fact, aunt Hagar, though I blush to acknowledge the fact—to think that one of my sex is so devoid of womanly propriety," and Judith sighed heavily.

"That's no more than could be expected of Christie Dorne, or the likes of her," said the old woman, with a confidential air; "though for the world I wouldn't say any thing against her on her brother's account, for the poor, dear man has trouble enough with her."

"But what do you suppose takes her off after the party, aunt Hagar?—that's the question."

"Humph! Mercy sakes; that's easy enough guessed; Adam Farwell, to be sure."

"That's it exactly, aunt Hagar. If I'd been in her place I would 'a' died before I'd 'a' followed them after saying I wouldn't go."

"That's what any decent girl would have done, Judith, though I would not, for all the world, harm one hair of the poor, unfortunate Christie's head. No, no; I'm not inclined to make mischief, nor speak harsh of my neighbors, but I do think Mr. Farwell had ought to inquire into Christie's character before going so far."

"Do you know any thing about her, aunt Hagar?" asked the jealous girl, eagerly.

"Don't ask me, Judith," said the old woman, knitting away vigorously, with a knowing toss of the head, and a significant glance at the cradle.

Judith's heart fluttered with joy, for she believed she had at last struck the proper keynote to her heart's desire. She knew by old Mrs. Cummings' answer that she was dying to tell something—some secret, which a little confidential coaxing and flattery would bring out with all the details.

"I am sure, aunt Hagar, it is our Christian duty to point out all pitfalls to our benighted brethren. If Mr. Farwell is likely to stumble into a pitfall hidden under a pretty face, he should be warned. What does our Guide say in regard to this?" and Judith reached up and took from the mantel-board a copy of the New Testament, the only rule of Mennonite faith. She selected different passages and read them to aunt Hagar, enlarging both upon the language and construction, as occasion suited. In this manner she worked the

old lady up to the keenest sense of her Christian duty, and when she saw tears pouring copiously from Hagar's eyes, she felt that a spontaneous flow of all her secrets was sure to follow.

"So you see, aunt Hagar," the invidious girl continued, "that it is your duty to give such information as will benefit a fellow-being."

"I see it now, Judith dear; it is better to keep a pure soul from the stain of crime than to save one from destruction already bearing a stain. We must rescue Mr. Farwell before he goes too far."

"Then Christie is not worthy of his love?" persisted Judith.

"No, Judith, no," sobbed the old woman.

"What evidence have you of this, aunt Hagar?"

"That—that poor little waif," she said, pointing to the baby before her; "that is Christie Dorne's child."

"Oh, heavens!" exclaimed Judith, bursting into a flood of tears, and weeping, not with sorrow and grief for Christie's dishonor, but with a joy that was uncontrollable.

CHAPTER XLIII.

THE SECRET OF THE BLUE LEDGE MINE.

"OH, aunt Hagar!" cried Judith, when she had somewhat recovered from her intense emotions, "tell me this is not true of poor Christie."

"I wish I could, Judith, for she seems like a sweet, dear soul," replied aunt Hagar; "but her child was born six months ago in our cabin, and well has the secret been kept. It was not her desire to keep it secret—"

"The bold, impudent thing!" exclaimed Judith, her grief turning to scorn and indignation.

Mrs. Cummings continued:

"But it was her brother's desire, and he pays me well for my service in having tended Christie during her illness, and for taking care of the baby now. It nearly killed her brother; I never heard one take on as he did. I rather think he wants to keep the whole matter a secret from Farwell, for I know he wants Adam to marry Christie; and it'd be a shame for him not to know the truth."

"Yes, I know so, too; but, please Heaven, he shall not marry a girl as unworthy of him as that Christie."

"She always claimed to me, Christie did, that her child was not a disgrace to her; but that she had been legally married, and that it was the blessing that crowned her union with a young man whose name I have forgot. She persists in keeping it a secret; but why, I can't say."

"Indeed?" exclaimed Judith. "Well, it has been hard for me to think evil of Christie. But does her brother not know of her marriage?"

"It seems he don't. She told me that Herbert hated the man she had married, and through hopes of his becoming reconciled, she had kept it a secret from him. Though, when her child was born, she told him it was no disgrace to her; and that she would yet prove it. The reason she has aided her brother in keeping the matter a secret was through some fear of not being able to establish the facts of her marriage, should her husband be killed or die before he came after her, as he promised her he would this fall. She tells me that, at the time of her marriage, she was living with her brother at Virginny City, and so she went over to Carson City one day to spend a few months with some cousins; and while on this visit she was married and lived with her husband some two months before she returned home. Her cousins were witnesses to her marriage, she tells me, and advised her to never go back to her brother; but she promised her dying mother, she says, that she would never leave her brother without his consent; and this was another thing that made her stick to him through all this suffering and torture. If her husband is living I hope he'll come and take care of her and her child, for I can't keep it much longer. It's a darling little chub, but my strength and health won't—"

"I'd let her tend to her own brat," said the amiable Miss Royce, "and then she will not have so much time to go on pleasure excursions. Somehow or other, I can't put implicit faith in her stories, aunt Hagar. It's natural enough that she would concoct some apparently truthful story to conceal her shame."

"Well, time will tell," answered Hagar, and the subject was permitted to drop.

Judith soon took her departure, feeling that all her jealousies had been without foundation, and that the way was clear to Adam Farwell's heart.

Three days later Major Loomis and party returned from their hunting excursion, to find the settlement in an uproar and excitement over the abduction of aunt Hagar Cummings' baby.

Christie Dorne fell fainting at the news. When she recovered consciousness, she found she was lying upon a bed in her own home, with her brother watching by her side, and his face wearing the deepest trouble.

Starting up, she exclaimed:

"Oh, brother! have you found my baby?"

"Not yet, sister; but we will find it. It has been ascertained that some vagabond Indians were around the Cummings' cabin the day of the abduction, and it is supposed they stole it away. As soon as you are well enough for me to leave, I shall head a party in search of it. Your child shall be recovered."

Christie was startled by her brother's words, spoken so kind and affectionate. Something had touched and softened his heart toward her; and it seemed more like a dream than reality that he should dismiss all selfish motives and address her with his former brotherly affection.

"Herbert, oh, Herbert!" she cried, "it pleases me to hear you speak thus—oh, you don't know how it pleases me!"

"No doubt of it, Christie, since I have been such a cruel, selfish monster toward you. But you were in a measure to blame, sister. Had you told me some things you have kept from me, I could not have done as I did."

"What has changed you, brother?" asked Christie.

"This," he said, holding up a letter. "I received it from the mail-carrier a few minutes since. It is from cousin Bertha, of Carson City, and in it she asks: 'Has Christie ever told you the Secret of the Blue Ledge Mine?' I comprehend the meaning of that Secret. You and Idaho Tom were married there, as narrated by Squire Kit Bandy, a few evenings since. I merely guess at your having married Tom; am I right?"

"You are, brother; and cousin Bertha and Dan, and several other persons were there as witnesses. We were all *en mask*, and Squire Bandy did perform the ceremony. Tom and I were visiting our friends at Carson. You know, brother, why I have kept all this from you, and now I have only to ask your forgiveness."

"You have nothing of which to be forgiven. It is I, Christie, who should ask forgiveness. But no longer will I stand between you and Tom, if he is living. He has shown a spirit of manhood and forbearance with me, worthy of any one. I shall assist you to find both your young husband and babe."

"Oh, brother! this is joy to my ears! I knew you would not be heartless and cruel when you knew the truth, which I have been afraid to tell you so long."

"Had I known all this sooner, things would doubtless have been different. But, did you know Idaho Tom was in this country, before you met him the other night?"

"I knew he was coming," she answered. "He was to have been here in two weeks from this time—the time limited for telling you the Secret of the Blue Ledge Mine. But I fear some danger has befallen Tom, Herbert—that all is forever lost—my babe and my husband."

"You left him, then, on the prairie?"

"Yes; it was he that rescued me from the outlaws' wagon, though neither of us recognized the other in the darkness. Afterward, Kit Bandy sent him to me on the prairie. While together, a band of robbers approached. He placed me on his horse and I fled, leaving him alone to contend with the villains. If, however, he is in the power of the outlaws, he will be released. This I was promised by one in whom I have great confidence and hope. But our babe—oh! what cruel wretch has torn him from me at this hour when all should have been happiness?"

The young mother wrung her hands and wept bitterly.

At this juncture there came a rap at the door.

Herbert Dorne answered the summons, and admitted Major Loomis to the house.

"My young friends," he said, without any prelude whatever, "I am just down from Cummings' cabin, and the old woman has made the revelations of more secrets than the Old Scratch could shake a stick at concerning that baby; says it's Christie's."

"It is, Major," answered Christie. "I have made a clean breast of all to brother. The babe was mine, and Idaho Tom's my husband."

"Your husband? Who ever heard of the like before?"

"You remember Kit Bandy's story of the secret marriage in the Blue Ledge Mine?" asked Herbert.

"Yes, I do remember it; so you were one of the party, were you, Miss Christie? Well, I know now why you fainted when Squire Bandy told the story. By gracious! if this ain't a relief to me, I don't know. But why have you kept this a secret so long, Christie?"

Christie told him all the particulars of her brother's dislike for Idaho Tom; her dying mother's request, and her clandestine marriage with Tom while visiting friends at Carson City.

"Such a story of self-denial and sacrifice!" exclaimed the bluff old major; "why, Herbert, you ought to be ashamed of yourself, and make all reparation in your power."

"This, major, I have promised Christie, and propose to set off at once in search of her husband and babe," said Herbert.

"Well, I hadn't got through about that baby and old Mrs. Cummings. The old woman's about distracted, and in a moment of frenzy, in which the phantom of a guilty conscience lashed her spirit into the fear of some terrible punishment, made a clean breast of all. After telling whose child it was, she up and told *where* it was; and now what do you think she done with it?"

"Heaven only knows!" cried Christie.

"Why, she gave it away—gave it to her half-breed son and his wife, who have been visiting her, and wanted the child for a mate for theirs. Beats anything on record."

A terrible weight was lifted from Christie's heart.

"When did they leave here?" she asked.

"Yesterday morning, on foot. They struck for the country away north of the Missouri. We can follow them on horseback—we'll have that baby or ransack creation over and under, and I for one am ready to strike out."

"I will be ready in a few minutes, major," said Herbert; and when the minutes were up, Christie, brave and peerless Christie, was mounted and equipped to accompany them in search of her child and her gallant young husband, Idaho Tom.

CHAPTER XLIV.

KIT BANDY IN A TIGHT PLACE.

LEAVING the Mennonite folks to pursue their way in search of Christie's child, we will return to those whom we left in the night on the Powder river.

These persons were Kit Bandy and Ichabod Flea, Dan having returned to the island with the half-breed, Qadocq. The two men continued to float down the river until the ford, hitherto mentioned, was reached, when they put into the west shore and landed. Then they crept silently along the water's edge until they reached the crossing, when they turned their backs upon the river and hurried away along the pass. They journeyed about two miles westward, and turned to the left and followed a blind path leading among the trees and hills.

Ichabod led the way, with an ease that assured Kit of his being perfectly familiar with every step of the ground, and every crook and turn in the road.

After another hour's journeying along the sinuous winding of the path, and through mazes of tangled brushwood, they drew up in front of a low, wooden building, that stood at the mouth of a pass, grim and silent. Not a sign of life was to be seen or heard about the premises. The foreboding silence of death pervaded the place.

"This," whispered Ichabod, "is one of their relay stations, and here's where they brought your man, Idaho Tom. But I presume there are a thousand and one caves and hollows, nooks and corners around here where they might conceal a dozen men, and we could not find them. However, we've come here to look for him, and we won't go away dissatisfied. First and foremost, we want to call at the cabin and search it."

"But, s'pose we're not the men to do it?" suggested Kit.

"Hoss-fly! we'll not find any one here, unless it's some old woman or decrepit man."

"Then push ahead, Ichabod."

The two moved on, approached the door and rapped upon it in such a manner as to elicit the demand:

"Who dar, now?"

"Friends—open to us," answered Flea.

The person inside seemed to hesitate a moment, then unbolted and threw open the door.

"Now, who be you, anyhow?"

"The boys, Dinah," answered Kit, and the two men stepped into the cabin, without waiting for an invitation.

The woman opened a dark-lantern, and flashed it into their faces.

"Oh, Lor' 'a' mercy! you's strangers here!" cried the fat wench before them, in accents of terror.

"We know it, but we want to lodge here to-night."

"You jis git out ob here, dat's what you do! If de ole massa comes and find you here, he jist raise ole Ned."

"We want something to eat and drink, Dinah," said Flea.

"Not a bite, not a drink shell you have!" she answered; "and fo' de Lord you'd better trampooze from dis bungalow."

"Where are the men folks?"

"Dat none ob your business, either."

"Well, we'll burn the house, hang you, and feed you to the wolves, if you don't tell us where you keep your prisoners—where the men put the young man they brought here an hour ago."

"Lor' sakes, how you talk! You's crazy as a bed bug!"

The men exchanged smiles, for they saw that the wench was half drunk, while fumes of liquor pervaded the room. While Kit kept an eye on the negress, Ichabod rummaged the house over and over, but could find nothing of the prisoner. He found, however, a jug of whisky, to which he and Kit seemingly helped themselves, and then passed it to the negress.

The old woman's black face, which had hitherto been knit in anger and rage, now melted into a smile, and with a sleepy guffaw, she took the jug, lifted it to her mouth, and drank freely—smacking her lips with high gusto.

Kit and Ichabod next helped themselves to the pantry stores; ever and anon pretending to drink from the jug, and each time forcing the negress to drink with them. This finally terminated in the old woman getting so drunk that she could scarcely stand. Dropping into a chair, she looked up with a drunken leer, and said:

"He'p you-ah self (hic); ole Cricket's nice (hic) and drunck—don't keer a cent (hic) fo' anybody, so—"

"Hang up de (hic) fiddle and de bow—"

"Dinah, can't you dance?" asked Flea.

"Golly, guess I can (hic)," and she staggered to her feet and began to dance, but reeling and tottering like the circular spinning of a top.

Ichabod whistled, and Kit Bandy laughed till he cried.

Suddenly the wench lost her balance and fell. She went down upon the puncheon floor like a log.

"Lor' heavens!" she exclaimed, looking around in a sort of bewilderment, "s'pose I broke through? Why (hic), I'd jist went cl'ar down to de bottom ob de pit (hic) on dat young pris'ner."

"Ah-ha! we've got it a'ready, Kit!" exclaimed Flea. "I thought a little lubricating would do the nigger's tongue good, and make the secrets slip out of their own accord. Umph!—hugh! a pit under the floor! We will look after that, Christopher Bandy."

They seated old Dinah in one corner, out of the way; then they took up the slabs that comprised the floor, and gazed down. To their surprise they beheld a yawning pit beneath. The rays of the light failed to reach its bottom. Kit, leaning over the edge of the abyss, called out:

"Tom? Idaho Tom?"

His own words came back in a hollow groan.

"He's dead, if he's there, else he's down at the antipodes," said Flea.

The men found a rope-ladder rolled up and hung on a strong iron hook, driven into one of the "sleepers" of the floor. At once Kit took it from the hook, unrolled it on the floor, then carefully lowered one end into the pit, fastening the other on the hook. Then, all being ready for the descent, he hung the lantern on his arm, and slowly and cautiously descended the swaying, quivering ladder. As soon as he had disappeared with the light all was left in blinding darkness in the cabin. Ichabod Flea watched the descending light until it had dissolved into a kind of a twilight in the distant gloom, then with his revolver in his hand, he placed himself between the pit and door, to await the result of Kit's exploration.

Meanwhile, the old negress sat reeling in the corner, totally unconscious of what was going on.

Down into the depths of the abyss descended the fearless detective. The chasm appeared to be a natural one. Its sides were rough and irregular, and in diameter it varied from ten to twenty feet. Here and there, the sharp, jagged edge of a rock was thrust out like a wolf's fang, and here and there holes and fissures, in which a man might have concealed himself, indented the sides. In some of these "pockets" were boxes and bundles, which Kit had not a doubt contained stolen treasure of some kind. But he had not time to examine them, and with a glance at each, passed on. After the descent of fully fifty feet, he reached the bottom of the rift—a hard, smooth, stony floor.

Holding the lantern above his head, Kit glanced around him. The pit was quite spacious and the walls shelving—in other words resembling a long-necked funnel inverted. It would have been impossible for a person to have escaped from it without human aid; and yet after searching the pit through, he found nothing of Idaho Tom, as he had been led to expect he would from the old negress' unguarded remarks. He found a blanket or two; a robe of skins, and other evidence of the place having been recently occupied. But there was nothing to convince him that Tom had ever been an occupant of the dismal hole. He examined every inch of the environing walls as high as he could see, but no sign of an opening was visible. He began to speculate over the matter and a fear seized upon him when it suddenly occurred to him that the old Jezebel was only playing the part assigned her, and that he had been entrapped! This conviction forced itself upon his mind so forcibly that he became inwardly alarmed, and slipping the lantern-ring over his arm, he began ascending the ladder rapidly.

He had made more than half the distance, when the voice of Ichabod Flea came down to him like the knell of death in warning notes.

"Good God, Kit!" he exclaimed, "the robbers are upon us!"

The old detective, almost paralyzed with these startling words, hung immovable upon the ladder. He was not long, however, in recovering his presence of mind, and at once began to consider the proper course to pursue. While thus pausing, a horrible scream was heard above, and the next moment a human body shot past him—tearing against the sharp edges of the rocks, rebounding from side to side—and then fell with a sudden thump on the bottom.

"Oh, God! they have tumbled Ichabod into the shaft!" thought Kit, as the sound of wild, wrangling voices came from above. "I must go back, or they will cut the rope and let me fall."

He was about to begin the descent, when a little white hand was thrust suddenly out from the rocky wall at his side, and touched his arm.

"Here! creep into this passage, Kit," the voice said.

Then the arm was withdrawn, and Kit turned his eyes in time to see a white, human face disappear in the darkness of the passage before him!

CHAPTER XLV

TWO SURPRISES.

WITHOUT taking a second thought, Kit Bandy at once transferred himself from the ladder to the passage; and upon his hands and knees crept along several yards from the shaft. Then he stopped to listen, but all was silent as death itself. He thought of Ichabod lying dead in the bottom of the pit, and a shiver ran through his frame. Ichabod dead and he—had he been lured into a living grave?

A horrible smothering sensation took possession of him. He gasped for breath and tried to straighten himself. The walls seemed to be closing in upon him. A hot, suffocating air smote his feverish face. A dull, heavy instrument seemed pressing into his brain, and the sensation of floating off into the illimitable followed.

Reader, have you ever experienced this feeling? Were you ever in a close, dark room where breathing was difficult? and where thoughts of the shadows of death were forced upon your confused mind? and while scarcely conscious of existence, seemed floating away into the Infinite? If not, you have been spared a terrible feeling, created by excitement and born of a sense of horror—the feeling of gazing up through the gloom of a living grave!

A dim light suddenly flashed before the old detective's eyes,

and as his bewildered senses became more collected, a human face was unfolded from the nimbus of light and looked upon him. He recognized the face at once as that of the Princess Aree, the lovely daughter of the robber lieutenant! In her hand she held a light whose rays beat upon his haggard face.

"This way, Kit," she said, without any ceremony whatever.

"Aree!—child!" exclaimed Kit. "I wish to heavens I knew whether I'm going crazy or not. I never felt so queer in all my life."

"This is a dismal hole, Kit," the girl answered, "and it's a long way out of here. Let us get out before your escape by this passage is discovered, or you may have more trouble at the other end than at this. The men have sworn eternal vengeance upon you for deserting them."

"Ay, the bloody hellyons," said Kit, bitterly; "they have killed my friend Flea, tumbled him into that accursed pit! If I get out of this, I shall begin a war of extermination upon Prairie Paul's band, for we already have him a prisoner upon the island."

"What?" exclaimed Aree, "have you Prairie Paul a prisoner?"

"We have, by the horn of Joshua; that's what I've been working for over a year. Why, Miss Aree, I bear a commission as captain of a government detective force, and have been working up these outlaw cases to a demonstration. Ichabod Flea was one of my men, but the poor, reckless devil, has passed from duty forever."

"Indeed, this is news to me," said Aree.

"No doubt of it; but, Aree, do you know anything of Idaho Tom?"

"Yes; I rescued him from that pit a few minutes ago. He awaits us at the mouth of this passage."

"Oh, horn of Joshua!" exclaimed Kit, "I wish I had room and wa'n't afraid of upheaving this hill, and I'd give a terrible shout of joy. Well, well: Tom safe—glorious news."

They followed the passage along for several minutes, when Kit finally discovered they were approaching the entrance by the purity of the air.

Suddenly a figure stepped out from a kind of alcove in the wall and confronted them.

It was the form of Idaho Tom.

"Horn of Joshua!" burst from Kit's lips, as he grasped the extended hand of the young captain of rangers.

"Glad to meet you, Kit," said Tom.

The young ranger looked pale and fatigued, in the glare of the garish light.

"They've been using you rough, Tom, I know by your looks," said Bandy.

"They have indeed, Kit, and when I was lowered into that shaft I thought that I'd entered my grave."

"It's a dismal hole, Tom; and at the bottom lies my friend Flea, a mangled mass of flesh."

Tom shuddered, and a momentary silence followed.

"I've had enough of adventure in the Black Hills to do me a lifetime," Tom finally said. "If I live to get out of this, I shall settle down into a quiet life. Aree tells me that—that Christie Dorne is safe."

"Yes, at last accounts; but what is she to you, Tom?"

"She is my wife," answered Tom.

"Oh, Lord!" exclaimed Kit, "you don't say?"

Aree smiled, though her poor heart lay sad and heavy.

"You married, Idaho Tom? When did you marry?—where?" asked Kit, in astonishment.

"You married us, Kit, over a year and a half ago, in the Blue Ledge Mine."

Kit Bandy started aghast. Dumb with surprise, he stared at Idaho Tom.

Tom laughed softly at his astonishment, then asked:

"Don't you believe it, Kit?"

Kit shook his head.

"Don't you remember the nugget of gold shaped like a wolf's head?" Tom asked.

"I do," said Bandy, his features relaxing into a satisfied look; "that was to be the proof of the bridegroom's marriage. Thomas, allow me to congratulate you, for I'll swear to heaven I never dreamed of it being you before. Why didn't you tell me sooner?"

"I—I—well, I didn't want to for a while yet—until I found out what your present avocation might be."

"Horn of Joshua! this explodes the Secret of the Blue Ledge. Well, boy, I can see further than I did. When I was with Christie, I guessed that she knew who I was, but for the life of me, I couldn't get a word out of her."

"Yes, and you remember she fainted when you told the story in the hunters' camp?" said Aree.

"How in thunder do you know she fainted? and that I told a story?" Kit asked, in great surprise.

"I was there."

"You wasn't."

"I was—as Antelope Arth."

"Horn of Joshua! I must be a fool—a pretty detective that can't see so thin a disguise. Well, what surprise next?"

"Your wife, Sabina, is in the hills hunting you," persisted Aree; "I met her to-day."

"That's no news, princess; I met her to-night, and if ever a man caught rats, I did. We parted—I outran her, but the Lord only knows when she may drop upon me like a hawk—a hurricane—a painter."

"We had better be getting away from here," said Tom.

"Aree tells me the boys are encamped on an island a few miles from here."

"Yes; they are."

"Will you go with us, Aree?"

"Only to the river as guide," she answered.

They filed out of the cavern and with closed lantern moved away toward the ford. An hour's journeying brought them to the water's edge, where Aree again bid Tom farewell and vanished before he could respond.

Kit led the way along the river toward the point where he and Ichabod had left the boat. As they approached the place they heard a footstep. Both stopped and listened. Some one was near the boat. Was it friend or foe? For a minute they were undecided what course to pursue; then a low, peculiar whistle arrested their attention.

Kit seized Tom by the arm, and the youth could see that he was terribly agitated by the sound he heard.

"Lord!—horn of Joshua!" he exclaimed; "did I hear aright, Tom?"

The whistle was repeated.

A cry burst from old Kit's lips, and he bounded forward and grasped the hand of the man at the boat.

"Great horn of Joshua, Ichabod!" he exclaimed, wringing his friend's hand, "I mourned you as dead—I s'posed you lay smashed flatter than a pancake and deader than Abel in the bottom of that infernal pit."

"Not a bit of it, Christopher Bandy," said Ichabod. "I sprung out of the cabin window, and just as I went out a robber came rushing into the room in the darkness, and fell headlong into the pit."

"Well, verily, the Lord favors us after all; for you are alive, and here's Idaho Tom, Ichabod. Mr. Taylor, my friend, Mr. Flea."

Tom and Ichabod shook hands and congratulated each other on their escape.

Then the trio stepped into the boat, pushed out into the river, turned and moved up the stream.

They had journeyed half the distance to the island, when the terrible clash of firearms came from the direction of the island.

"My great-grandfather!" cried Kit, "they're in trouble at the island—pull, Ichabod, pull for life!"

Ichabod and Kit both being provided with a paddle, sent the craft leaping through the water like the blood through their veins, and as they advanced the sound of battle grew louder, more terrific, more deadly!

CHAPTER XLVI.

A HAPPY REUNION.

"THE Indians have got aboard the island," decided Kit, when they had rounded a bend where they could see the flash of the death-dealing weapons, "and it will be a bloody fight. We must have a hand in it, boys. Pull, Ichabod, pull."

In a minute more they reached the upper side of the island and landed, but by this time the conflict had ended, and the wild, triumphant shouts of the rangers told who were the victors. To this victory was added the joyful tidings of Idaho Tom's safe return, and again the hills flung back, in echoes, the wild shouts that burst from the lips of the rangers.

For some time the most joyful confusion reigned, but the startling information that Prairie Paul had escaped during the conflict in a measure put an end to their rejoicing. How the outlaw captain had escaped, no one knew to a certainty; but the general impression at once prevailed that Qadocq and his wife had released him. During the fight these three had been left alone in the cabin, the half-breeds regarding the struggle and its final result with a cool indifference that was decidedly remarkable.

When accused of releasing the prisoner, and threatened for their meddling, the twain simply denied it, and at the same time manifested no uneasiness whatever.

Dakota Dan rushed into the cabin soon after the conflict was ended and congratulated Tom on his release; and then going to the basket, bent over it, saying:

"The baby's safe, is it? the little codger! Thomas—Idaho Tom, come here and see what a pet we rough ole bears have got."

Tom came in and looked at the baby.

"Ar'n't he a delicious little sockdolager? Lord! you'd ort to hear him cry and crow, kick and fight. I tell ye, he's a royal little angel of a Bengal tiger. Jist stoop down and let him pull yer whiskers, and fetch ye one atween the eyes with that chubby fist, and then you'll feel like goin' to heaven."

"Horn of Joshua!" exclaimed Kit Bandy, "man—Dan-yil, if you'd ever 'a' been married as I've been, you'd not gush so over an Ingin baby."

"Ingin nothin'!" exclaimed Dan. "Look at it, and if ever you see'd a whiter, purtier, sweeter little angel, tell me of it. That one hangin' thar is red."

"It is a white baby, and how the deuce does it come? Must be sumthin' wrong. Ingins, hain't you been stealin'?"

The woman looked at the man, who shook his head demurely. "It's no use whinin', boys; that baby has no business here," said the old detective; "look at its clothes and its face, for evidence of good parentage. And, dogged if I haven't seen some one it resembles; and who can it be?" and he pressed his brow reflectively.

Meanwhile, Darcy Cooper and the rangers, assisted by Snowball the darkey, and Ichabod Flea, were looking after the

safety of the island, and removing the bodies of the enemies who had fallen in the late conflict. When this was done, half a dozen guards were posted at different points around the island, and every precaution taken to prevent another surprise.

Dakota Dan and Kit Bandy, however, could not remain quiet on the island, and nothing would do but that they must go ashore and watch the movements of the enemy. Kit vowed his intention of recapturing Prairie Paul if he had to stay in the hills ten years. He had promised to deliver the outlaw chief, dead or alive, to the government authorities, and he meant to do it.

The two old scouts embarked in a canoe, going down the river. They did not use a paddle, but for safety, permitted the craft to float at the current's will. In this manner they journeyed on over a mile from the island, Kit Bandy relating his adventures of the night as they went. He told Dan, also, of the Secret of the Blue Ledge Mine, and it was with no little astonishment that the old ranger received the news of Idaho Tom's marriage with Christie Dorne.

Finally they turned in toward the western shore, and as they approached the bank, Humility, whom his master had taken along, set up a low cry of alarm.

Enjoining silence upon the animal, they listened, and to their surprise, heard some one speaking in a subdued tone on shore. Both were too cautious to make any sound by which an enemy might obtain a knowledge of their position; but had decided to allow their boat to drift beyond danger, when a voice called out:

"Halt! who comes there?"

"Bow-wow!" barked Humility, before his master could prevent him; and that the dog had done just what they did not dare do themselves, they resolved to make the best of their situation, and so Kit answered:

"It's us, that's who."

"That is not satisfactory, sir," replied the challenging party.

"Oh, it ar'n't? Well, this feller with me is Dakota Dan, and the gentleman with Dan-yil is ole Kit Bandy," answered the detective.

"By George! can this be possible? Lay to, gentlemen, and land. I am Major Loomis, of Mennovalle, and with me is a lady and gentleman in great distress. Come ashore, gentlemen, come ashore."

Both Kit and Dan recognized the old major's voice, and at once put ashore.

The major met them with extended hands, and after a cordial greeting, conducted them into a sort of cavern, in the towering bluff overlooking the river, where, before a dim fire, sat Herbert Dorne and his sister Christie.

"Horn of Joshua!" exclaimed Kit, in astonishment.

Both Herbert and Christie rose and advanced with greetings to the old bordermen.

"Of all other men," said Herbert, "you are the two whose presence is most desired."

"Why, young friends, what's the matter?"

"We are in trouble—distress, Mr. Bandy," said Christie, with tears in her eyes. "Some vagabond Indians have carried my child away, and we are in search of them, with little hopes."

"Then dismiss all care and trouble, Mrs. Taylor," said Kit, "for I know where your child is; we just left it."

A cry of joy burst from Christie's lips.

"I tell ye it's a royal little chunk of sweetness," put in old Dan.

"You address my sister as Mrs. Taylor, Kit; upon what authority?" asked Herbert.

"Upon the authority that solemnizes a marriage. Idaho Tom, the scamp, has proven to me, beyond doubt, the Secret of the Blue Ledge Mine marriage."

"Can you establish the fact of your being a legal officer at the time of the marriage?"

"Very easily, sir; moreover, I have married a number of couples since that time. You have to refer to the records of Carson City to ascertain these facts. What makes you doubt my authority to solemnize a marriage, is the opinion you have formed of me from my general appearance. But, Mr. Dorne, I have had a method in my strange, rude conduct, talk and actions; and I tell you why: I am a detective—one of the government force. I have not only been sent to the hills here to ferret out the hiding-places of Prairie Paul's band, but to keep an eye upon the agents of the government who have been accused of practicing gigantic frauds upon the Indians and government in various ways. Here, sir, is the commission I hold," and he handed Herbert a stained and worn paper for perusal.

"Do you know where Tom is?" asked Christie.

"He's at the island, too," answered Bandy.

Joy's radiance settled upon every feature of the poor young thing's face; and overcome with the glad tidings, she sat down and wept with happiness, mentally murmuring a prayer of thanks.

"Well, it won't do for you to remain here much longer," said Kit, "you're in the immediate vicinity of Prairie Paul's headquarters; and the outlaws, with forty or fifty outlaw Indians, are raising the Old Harry."

"But we have horses near that we will have to leave," said Major Loomis.

"You will have to leave them, and perhaps they will escape the eyes of the enemy for a day or two," answered Bandy. "We have our animals on the island, and I'm afraid they'll starve to death unless we get 'em off soon."

It required but a few minutes for all to prepare for return to the island.

Embarking in the canoe, Kit and Dan used the paddles with such skill and adroitness that the occupants could scarcely hear a sound. In this manner they crept along through the misty night, and ere they were expecting it a guard on the island challenged them.

Dakota Dan answered, when they were permitted to put ashore and land.

"Where's Idaho Tom?" asked Kit, the moment he stepped ashore.

"In the cabin."

The old detective led Christie across the island and into the cabin, where a bright fire was burning, and before which Idaho Tom sat, silently regarding the child in the basket, and the dusky woman seated by it.

"Oh, Tom! Tom!" cried Christie, the instant her eyes fell upon him.

Tom started up at the sound of her voice, and the next instant the young husband and wife were clasped in each other's embrace!

CHAPTER XLVII.

ARCHES OF FIRE.

IN the bliss consequent upon their unexpected meeting, Tom and Christie forgot all else—that a score of others were witnesses to their joyous reunion and the words of love and thanks that fell from their lips.

Herbert stole slyly to the basket in which slept Christie's baby, and lifting the child in his arms, walked to where the young couple stood, and said:

"My dear friends, with your child, receive my forgiveness and my eternal blessing."

The young couple were rendered speechless by this new joy. Christie clasped her child to her breast, while Tom turned, and taking Herbert's hand, at length said:

"Herbert, I have lived in the hope and belief that this hour of joy would come."

"Three cheers for Idaho Tom, his wife and baby!" burst from old Dan's lips, and the next moment the hills re-echoed the shouts that pealed from the lips of the ranger and the detectives.

After all had become reconciled and gathered around the fire, the scene presented was that of a happy family gathering, from grandfathers Bandy and Rackback, down to the lisping babe.

Some one called attention to the fact, when Dakota Dan said:

"Thar's but one pusson wanted to complete the party."

"And who's that?" asked Ichabod Flea.

"Sabina Bandy, who's abroad somewhere in the hills."

Kit and Ichabod roared with laughter.

"That's a good one, Dan," said Flea.

"Delicious—superb," added Kit; "for, Dan-yil, thar's no such a person in existence as Sabina Bandy, to my—"

"Then you murdered her?" responded Dan.

"There's the Sabina that you saw," said Kit, pointing to Ichabod. "He has been following me in female disguise for six months. It has been a part of my programme that he should; and if ever there was an opportune arrival, it was when he released me from the outlaws and Indians to-night. He almost overdid the thing, however, in personifying an enraged wife, especially when he pulled my hair."

An outburst of laughter pealed from his auditors' lips.

"Well, what in the name of sense is to come next?" exclaimed old Dan, somewhat embarrassed.

"I hope no further trouble," said Major Loomis.

"Me, too, major," said Dan, seriously; "but, somehow or other, I have had a strange presentiment since the moment I first saw that little child. The contrast between it and me, tells me that my days of usefulness are about over; and I feel as though I war expectin' or waitin' for something, I know not what. Major, do you b'lieve in presentiments?"

"Only in those that cast a visible shadow before," answered Loomis.

Dan sighed, and stealing a sly glance at Christie's baby, that seemed conscious of the happiness of its parents and was celebrating the reunion by a series of kicks and crows, he rose to his feet and went out into the open air; and, calling Huminty to his side, walked around to the building where old Patience was hitched. Here he sat down, caressed his dog and the mare that fondled around him. He could not remain inactive, however, and going to the cabin he announced his intention of going ashore to watch the enemy. Then he walked away to the upper side of the island, and springing into a canoe, took Huminty in with him and embarked for the west shore.

"There's something preying on Dan's mind, boys," remarked Kit Bandy, as the old ranger left the cabin.

"He seems a little down," said Major Loomis, "but I presume it's because he hasn't had a fight for an hour or two. Singular it is, how one's habits effect the mind and body."

Meanwhile the half-breed, Qadocq, and his wife, had sat silently by, demure spectators to what was going on. Christie had spoken kindly to the woman, for she could not find it in her heart to censure the poor savage creature for her great desire to possess the white baby. Her mother, Mrs. Cummings, was the one upon whose shoulders all blame fell for the child's abduction.

The night wore slowly away without any further demonstrations from the Indians.

It was nearly morning ere Dakota Dan returned to the island. He brought the news that a number of Indians and outlaws had been busily engaged during the whole night erecting a raft on the river in the vicinity of the ford. He did not ascertain the purpose for which it was intended; however, the object was quite obvious to all—a general assault upon the island.

The situation of our friends seemed to become more precarious every hour they remained upon the island. They could not escape now by a sudden dash, or any movement requiring exposure, physical hardships and endurance, for they had the care of a woman and babe resting upon their shoulders; and there was not a man but what would have died rather than desert them.

Another enemy besides the outlaws would soon be besieging them. It was hunger? Their supplies were already nearly exhausted, and there was but little chance afforded for replenishing them.

"Don't cry before you're into the fire," enjoined old Dan; "we can kill and eat a boss rather than starve."

The night finally wore away, and a new day was ushered in. The sun rose in a clear sky. The forest trees shook the mist from their robes in the morning air. The birds sung their carols as of yore. The river swept on in its power and might. The fair face of nature beamed upon all with resplendent beauty, and filled the hearts of the besieged with renewed hopes and courage.

The men were astir quite early, and as no sign of an enemy was to be seen along the river, they indulged in the freedom of the island, and also the hope that the foe had withdrawn. But in this they soon found that they were mistaken. A shot from the east bluff seriously wounded one of the rangers, and admonished the rest that they dare not expose themselves with impunity.

That they would be compelled to remain upon the island another day was evident; and the Fates only knew how much longer than a day unless some unforeseen event should turn up to deliver them from their perilous situation.

The day wore slowly and heavily away.

Now and then a shot from the shore warned the besieged that the enemy were at their post.

No attempt whatever was made by any one to go ashore.

Kit Bandy, effecting his usual droll and comical role, did all in his power, assisted by Major Loomis and Ichabod Flea, to keep up the spirits of the party.

Dakota Dan was also unusually lively, though all could see that something serious was upon his mind. Some attributed it to his anxiety and desire for the safety of Christie and her baby, for never did he seem so happy as when in the atmosphere that surrounded the angelic presence of the little one.

When the shadows of night began to gather, every preparation was made to meet an attack. All felt certain that the enemy would not let another night pass without some demonstration, and that well planned too by the villain, Prairie Paul, whose knowledge of the defensive forces on the island, and the weakest points of the old ruins, would doubtless give him some hope of success.

At dark the animals were all led out to water; the buildings on the exposed side were repaired, and every man was assigned his post to be occupied in case of an attack in the darkness.

The danger would come from up the river, though no point was unguarded, and soon after nightfall, a man was placed in a canoe and sent up the river to watch the movement of the raft. This he was enabled to do without any risk, for the night fell black, starless and wild.

Over the east bluff among the rocks the light of a fire shot athwart the gloom an hour or so after dark. What it meant no one could tell until suddenly a blazing object was seen to shoot up into the air, describe a beautiful curve through the darkness and descend toward the island. It fell in the water a few feet from the edge of the island with a spiteful hiss, then all was darkness.

"Ah!" exclaimed old Dakota Dan; "they're goin' to shoot blazin' arrows into us."

"Horn of Joshua!" returned Kit, "let 'em shoot. They can't make them old damp, moss-covered logs and shingles burn—there! ar'n't it beautiful?"

Another burning arrow curved through the air from the bluff and fell on the edge of the island, where it smoked and steamed in the damp sand awhile, then went out. Presently another from a point lower down the river streamed through the air like a meteor and fell with a "thuss" in the river.

"They're feelin' for the distance, the range and the elevation now," said Dan, "and if me and Humility war ashore, we'd feel the varmints' jugulars—we'd infuse into their systems a bit of lead and hydrapobia."

"Just wait till they git to work and we'll see a grand pyrotechnical display that'd tickle the soul of a Chinaman," declared Bandy; "but, in the mean time, boys, don't let us get so interested in this part of their programme as to overlook the other. I opine that raft 'll be along soon; but then, Ichabod will give us ample warning of its approach—zip!"

An arrow streamed through the darkness and fell with a thud on the roof of the cabin. It blazed up for a moment so lively that our friends feared the shingles would ignite despite their dampness; but, finally it died out, and darkness reigned supreme.

The arrows now began to fly thick and fast. As they rose from the bluff, the dim outline of the shooter could be faintly discerned in the instantaneous flash as the burning missile left his hand. Some of the arrows fell on the buildings; some against the side, and many in the water. The air was bright

with them. The scene was grand and beautiful, and had the besieged not known that it was but a demonstration to disguise the real object the enemy had in view, they would have enjoyed it, since no harm would come from missiles that gave such glaring notice of their approach.

This bombardment was kept up for some time. Not a word escaped the lips of the enemy—not a shot was fired by our friends. The water between the east shore and island seemed bridged with an arched stream of fire. The roofs and sides of the buildings bristled with smoking, blazing shafts, and the water spluttered and foamed with the fiery darts. The horses in the buildings sniffed the air with alarm, while the besieged with wild, admiring gaze, watched and waited for what was to follow.

A canoe with a single occupant suddenly came cutting its way through the water and touched upon the island.

Its occupant was Ichabod Flea.

"Boys!" he cried, "they're coming in the raft!"

"How far away?"

"Not over forty rods."

"Boys," cried Kit, "every man to his post, and remember we must fight till the last."

"Ay, boys!" added old Dakota Dan; "it will be victory or death!"

CHAPTER XLVIII.

A NIGHT OF NIGHTS.

SILENT as shadows born of the night our friends took their positions to await the coming of the raft with its load of blood-thirsty demons, feeling that the night that now surrounded them would doubtless, to some of their number, be extended into the darkness of eternity. They felt that they could not go through another as terrible conflict as that of the previous night without some loss of life.

With the silence of death itself, each man waited and listened for the coming of the raft—a huge log-pen—behind whose heavy walls crouched two-score of enemies. The surge of the waves breaking upon the shore told of its near approach and at length to the fixed eyes peering into the gloom, a huge black mass shaped itself as it crept on through the water like some terrible, low-browed monster.

Dakota Dan's dog suddenly broke the silence by a warning bark.

The waves rolling on in advance of the raft now broke upon the island with an angry surge.

The firing of the burning arrows now ceased as if at a signal to that effect.

Kit Bandy suddenly arose, and thrusting his head out at an opening in the wall behind which they waited, demanded:

"Who comes there?"

But he received no answer save the roll and rebound of the waves.

He fired his revolver at the advancing raft; still there was no response.

Could it be that no one was aboard the raft?

This question arose in the mind of more than one, but before there was time for a second thought, it was answered. And such an answer!

A fierce yell that seemed the pent-up wrath and fury of a hundred demons, burst upon the air as the raft came to a stand against the island; but it was promptly answered with a shout of defiance from our friends.

Then over the walls of the raft swarmed the screaming demons; into the water they leaped and plunged ashore. A stream of fire from a score of rifles behind the ruined walls met their advance, and the yells and groans of dying men were added to the tumult of battle that now rent the night. Still the outlaws, nothing daunted by this first and unexpected reception, pressed on—swarmed over the walls—through the breaches that time had made, into the very midst of the defenders. And then, in the darkness, ensued a struggle that no pen can describe. It was a hand-to-hand encounter, and in the gloom one could not distinguish friend from foe. At least such was the case at the beginning of the battle, but, soon as all had come together, the robbers and outlaw savages dexterously brought into view upon their breasts a small blazing ball of fire—the robbers' night signal. But they had not counted upon it serving a double purpose—of being of greater benefit to their enemies than themselves. It told our friends where to strike, for well they knew what it meant.

Pistols, clubbed rifles, tomahawks and knives crashed and tore their way through air and flesh. Steel met steel in deadly clash; foes grappled and fell; cries of agony were mingled with yells of defiance. Crunching blows of heavy weapons, the hissing jar of pistol-shots, and the dull thump of falling bodies—all conspired to make the hour one of awful horror.

To and fro the tide of battle swayed across the island—now the minions of Prairie Paul seemed to hold the promise of victory, now the rangers. Above all could be heard the voices of Kit Bandy and Dakota Dan.

Idaho Tom and his rangers used their favorite weapons—their revolvers—and wherever a ball of fire was seen upon a breast, a bullet was sent with almost certain death toward it.

Prairie Paul soon saw where he had made a terrible blunder, in arranging targets upon his men's breasts; but he saw it too late. His Indians became panic-stricken at their loss, and

plunging into the river, fled. The surviving outlaws had no alternative but to follow, and all essayed to escape; but one, and one alone, failed. Prairie Paul stumbled over a dead body and fell. Before he could regain his feet a blow on the head laid him insensible.

Idaho Tom, bleeding at more than one wound, now ran to the cabin to inform his wife of their victory. He found the poor young thing cowering with terror in one corner with her babe clasped to her breast.

"Oh, Tom!" she cried, "I—"

"We have defeated them, darling—danger is past."

"Then my prayers have been answered, Tom," she said.

"Both safe, are they?" asked Kit Bandy, looking in at the door as he passed by.

Being answered in the affirmative he went on.

The half-breed, Qadocq, and his wife were gone. During the conflict they had stolen away, while Christie, with eyes closed, knelt in prayer.

The groans of the wounded and dying now filled the air, and made the night still more hideous and horrifying.

With torches the victors searched among the dead and dying for their comrades whose faces and voices were not among those who answered at roll-call.

Near where the battle began they found one of the young rangers, silent in death. A little further on lay Kit Bandy's companion, Ichabod Flea, breathing his last. Snowball, the negro, was found with a cloven skull, his fingers clutched upon the throat of a dead savage. In the search for others, Prairie Paul was found still insensible from the blow that had felled him to the earth. He was taken to the cabin and made a prisoner. Another of the young rangers, seriously wounded, was found and carried into a building where his wounds were dressed and every thing possible done to alleviate his suffering. Major Loomis and Kit Bandy acted as surgeons, the latter displaying no little skill in his knowledge of surgery.

While they were thus engaged, a grim, gaunt animal appeared in the doorway and gave forth a mournful howl. It was covered with blood, and a gaping wound was in its side; but, despite these, Bandy recognized it. It was the dog, Humility.

"Oh, Lord!" he exclaimed; "it's the dog of Dakota Dan. Boys, have any of you seen him since the fight?"

A moment later four men appeared, carrying a form that appeared lifeless. They laid it upon the ground by the fire.

"Great horn of Joshua!" cried Kit Bandy, in a tone of grief, "it is the form of Dan. Is he dead?"

He knelt down and felt his pulse.

"He lives," said the old detective; "his pulse is strong—bring some water, quick!"

Kit found a deep gash on the old borderman's head from which the blood was flowing profusely. A careful examination convinced him that the skull had not been fractured, though the blow had been of stunning force. He washed the blood from the face and hair, and dressed the wound the best he could. In a few moments Dan showed evidence of returning consciousness, to the joy of those around him.

While Kit, the major, Herbert Dorne and Christie and Tom attended on the wounded, the others removed all the enemy—the wounded and dead Indians and outlaws—from the island, and placing them aboard the raft that had brought them to their fate, sent them adrift down the river. The object in this was one of humanity and mercy: 't was that the enemy might care for their own dead and wounded.

Scarcely a man had escaped without some slight injury, but only those named were slain.

It was more than an hour before Dakota Dan recovered consciousness, and when he did, he gazed around him in bewilderment and started up with a wild cry, calling his dog.

"Hullo, friend Dan," said Kit; "you've been taking quite a nap; but, keep quiet, for you've a sore head where a devil hit you."

"Then we gained the victory, did we?" Dan questioned, speaking with some difficulty.

"We did for a fact—routed them horse and foot, but then—"

"But what did the victory cost?" the old fellow asked.

"I am sorry to say, Dan, it cost us some noble lives—four, I believe."

"Ah, me!" sighed Dan, "it was a terrible fight; but who wouldn't 'a' fit for that baby?—but, where's Humility, boys? Have you seen him since the fight?"

"Dan," said Idaho Tom, who came in in time to hear the question, "I am very sorry to say your dumb companion is dead—"

"What! Humility dead?" the old man cried, starting up, a wild look on his face; then, overcome with emotion, he sunk back upon his couch, and as a mist gathered in his eyes, murmured: "it's just as well, for mebbe he'd been abused. Poor ole dorg, he's seen a deal of ups and downs during his time. So have I, boys, and as my days of usefulness are numbered, it's just as well to go now."

"Why, Dan, you don't think you are going to die, from a little dig on the head, do you?" asked Major Loomis.

"Die?—why, we're all going to die, major."

"Yes, at some future time; but don't give up, Dan, for you're good for years yet."

This assurance seemed to afford him relief, for a smile flitted over his face, and closing his eyes he relapsed into silence. Presently he started up, saying:

"And so poor Humility's dead. That breaks the Triangle, boys, and the rest might as well go too. We've been awful busy doorin' our lives. I began life a wee little tod-

dler, like Tom's baby there, and many's the trials and troubles I've had. Old Patience, my mare, has been on the go ever since she could tote me; and Humility, my dorg, has done duty from the time he became the hydra-foby part of the Triangle. We've see'd a deal of life all the way from the Missouri river to the Pacific waters, and the blood of ole Dan Rack-back has stained the soil of every territory in the West. We've—that's the old Triangle—been a tornado to the enemies of civilization, and now I think our mission on earth has been filled and that my time has come to join those that have been waiting those long years over the river. I know I have been a rough old codger, but then I acted in the sphere in which God placed me, and feel in my heart that I will be admitted to the presence of the great Father."

"Dan, don't give up, for we cannot spare you yet," said Idaho Tom. "I think you will feel better after a night's rest; so compose yourself and take a good sound sleep."

"I'll do it, Tom, though you must wake me at daybreak," replied the old man. "And, look here, Tom; have the boys look after poor old Humility's body—tell 'em just to lay him away kind o' decently, and receive my thanks."

"I'll see that he is properly buried, Dan," said Tom.

The old ranger laid back upon his couch, closed his eyes and fell asleep in a few minutes.

The rest of the night was spent in the sad and solemn duty of burying the dead. Near the center of the island graves were dug with spades improvised from the boards of the roof of the cabin; and when the morning sun arose, it shone upon four mounds of fresh earth, over which many a scalding tear had been shed by brave-hearted comrades.

CHAPTER XLIX.

SIoux HONOR.

It was scarcely daylight when the attention of our friends was called toward the west shore of the river where over a hundred mounted Indians had suddenly issued from the woods and drawn rein. At sight of them every heart shuddered with terror, for against this superior force of the enemy all knew it would be useless to battle. An inevitable death stared them in the face, and yet the Indians manifested signs of peaceful intentions toward them; but they had been deceived so often by savage treachery that they put no faith in their pretended friendly advances.

At the head of the band Kit Bandy recognized the great chief Spotted Tail; and he knew at once that something decisive would soon occur, for if the chief had taken the war-path against them he knew they would have the whole tribe to contend with as long as they remained upon forbidden ground.

Kit Bandy was well aware that the Indians with whom they had been fighting were outcasts, just as Prairie Paul's band were outlaw whites, and while they were amenable to the tribe and the tribe to the government for violation of their treaty, there was but little ground upon which to appeal to the great chief for mercy. It is true the conditions of the treaty did not give the Indians the right to kill and punish those of the white race found intruding upon their territory; this was the duty of the government; and when it suddenly occurred to Kit that he was a government officer and there by special permission, and that, too, in behalf of the Indians, he thought he might possibly effect some compromise with the chief to enable his friends to get out of their dangerous situation.

He was about to open a conversation across the water with the chief when, to the surprise of all, they saw a woman gallop down the river and draw rein by the chief's side. It was Aree, the princess. She waved her hand toward the island; Idaho Tom stepped out in plain view of all and demanded:

"Is it with friendly intention that the great chief comes here?"

Aree answered that it was, and requested that a canoe be brought over to take the chief and herself to the island.

This one of the party hastily complied with, and in a few minutes Aree and the chief landed upon the island. Idaho Tom escorted the maiden to the cabin where she was welcomed by Christie, while Kit Bandy advanced to meet the chief, saying:

"Great chief, it pleases me to meet you here in this hour of trouble."

"Then the pale-face knows that I am not responsible for the trouble you have had?"

"Know it? in course I know it, chief, yet the Great Father at Washington will hold you responsible for all that your tribe does in violation of articles of the treaty."

"But, while my unruly warriors have been doing wrong by going away from their lands you pale-faces are doing wrong by going from yours."

"But we came here in pursuit of your warriors that had carried our friends away from their homes far beyond the limits of your reservation."

"The pale-face girl came to me with the news of your troubles here," said the chief, "and she begged and implored me to save you. I promised her I would."

"God bless her little soul," exclaimed Kit.

"I come to drive away the robbers and bad Ingins that you might return home and tell your people how Spotted Tail holds sacred his promise to the Great Father at Washington. The Sioux that have troubled you are all bad war-

riors and consort with bad white men. Over a hundred bad Ingins have deserted my tribe and hid away in the mountains with the bad whites who have deserted their people. The hills are the refuge for wicked men—the home of red and white outlaws. These have been troubling my white friends, yet I must be responsible for all that is done by the red-men, good and bad, off the reservation; but who will be responsible for what the white outlaws do upon the reservation?"

"Our government, chief; I am here, individually, for that purpose—to seek out the bad men that cheat and swindle the Indians. At this moment the outlaw captain, known as Prairie Paul, lies in yonder building, a captive, and if we are permitted to go hence I will take him along, 'dead or alive.'"

"The pale-face speaks strong; his words please the ear of Spotted Tail, and his face gives them strength and truth," answered the chief.

"Spotted Tail is a great and good chief—the friend of the white man," replied Kit, not to be outdone in bestowing compliments; "he has come from afar off with his brave warriors to deliver us from our enemies. Shall I tell the Great Father?"

"No," responded the chief, "let the bad deeds of the Indians go to balance the bad deeds of the white outlaws, and so let the kindness of the tribe go in search of kindness from the whites."

There was considerable sarcasm in the last words, but Kit affected not to hear it. There was also considerable policy in the chief's desire to keep the whole matter from the government. He was afraid of being brought into conflict with it, should the raids of his outlaw warriors upon the citizens beyond the limits of the reservation become known. In fact, Kit saw that the chief was really anxious for a compromise, and lost no time to effect these terms of agreement: The whites were to leave the island and reservation as soon as their wounded were able to be moved under an escort of friendly warriors; they were to kill no game in the hills aside from the actual wants of their party, and they were to make no complaint to the government of the Indian raids. Aside from his agreement to furnish a suitable escort for the party, the chief also promised to make no complaint against the whites.

The matter thus settled, all the horses were at once sent over to the main land to pasture, while Herbert Dorne went down after the animals his party had left there.

The Indians acted very friendly, and after tarrying a few hours on the island the chief took the main body of his warriors and left, leaving about thirty under a young war-chief to protect the little band of whites and escort them from the hills to the plains of Dakota, whenever they were able to move.

CHAPTER L.

A LONG FAREWELL.

As Dakota Dan had requested, Idaho Tom woke him before the sun arose. He seemed much refreshed in mind and body by his night's rest, and his face wore a calm, serene expression that none had ever seen there before. His voice, too, seemed clearer and his eyes brighter. He sat up on his couch and requested Tom to remove a piece of chinking from the wall facing eastward that he might see the sun rise. Tom did so, and a few moments later the sun looked over the eastern hills, and streaming in at the opening lit up the thin, emaciated face of the old borderman.

"Oh, how many times have I seen that sun rise, and ailers when I watched its comin' what an eventful day to me war sure to foller," the old man said, a perceptible tremor now shaking his voice.

"You surely don't anticipate any great event occurring to-day, do you, Dan?" asked Tom.

"I don't?" said the ranger, fixing his eyes upon Tom; "do you call death a great event?"

"Yes—the final event in man's earthly career, but; Dan—"

"Then to-day will see the final event in ole Dan Rackback's yearthly career," said the old man. "Boy—Thomas, I can't last much longer."

Overcome with emotion, Tom turned and walked out of the cabin to where Major Loomis and Kit Bandy were engaged in conversation.

"Major," he said, "what do you think about Dan's case?"

"I think he can last but little longer, Tom. He's been struck with death these two hours. That brightness of the eye, hollowness of the voice and whiteness about the lips and nostrils are certain evidence of death. Yes, yes; Dan will have to go. He followed his last trail in search of you, Tom."

Tom turned and going back into the cabin sat down by Dan's side.

"Dan," he said, in a choking voice, "is it possible that you are going to leave us?"

"Yes, Thomas; my days of usefulness are over. The good Lord has seen fit to call me from the trail of the wicked here onto the broader trail of everlasting life. I'm willin' to go, Tom, for I'm gettin' old and soon will be past self-support, then I would be in the way of the busy world. I've had a presentiment of death several days, Tom; and when I first looked upon your baby my thoughts grew serious at the contrast of life between us. It was feeble in youth—I in age. Everything war before, waitin' for it—all war left behind and forever gone from me, save an inheritance in heaven. You may think strange to hear ole Dakota Dan speak-

ing of heaven; but then I feel certain that God has given me hopes of future life. Night afore last, when in the woods alone, I prayed and prayed for hours—yes, old Dakota Dan prayed for forgiveness. My words warn't the most elegant, but the Lord could see into my heart, and know what I meant. My old mother larnt me to pray, years and years ago, but arter she died and climbed that golden stair I went out into the busy world, was catched up by the rushing tide of excitement, and forgot my early trainin'. But, I never forgot my mother, Tom—never; and now I'm goin' to see her. It's a long way to heaven, yet in a few hours I'll be there."

"Dan, it is hard to give you up," said Tom, the tears gathering in his eyes, while Christie sat near sobbing with bitter anguish of heart.

"You'll be along some day, Tom—you and Christie and the baby, and then we'll have a jolly good time. Don't take on 'bout me, for I'm of little consequence here now. I'm glad to hear that you're goin' to get away from here. It war good in the chief to drive the varmints away and leave you an escort."

"Is there any word, Dan, that you desire to send to your friends, that may—"

"No use; I'll take the word to them, Tom; I haven't a friend—yes, I have friends, too, but not a relative that I know of. But then that's my property—my rifle and Patience, my mare, Tom," and the tears gathered in the dying man's eyes. "I give and bequeath them to you. Old Patience is good for several years with kind treatment. A mighty good ole critter has she been to me, but no better than Humility, my dorg. The rifle, Tom, will do for your boy when he comes on the stage of active life. I wish I'd somethin' to leave your wife, Tom, but my effects are few and won't go around in your little family. I give her, howsumever, my blessing and love."

Here Dan's voice fell, as if completely out of breath. He heaved a great sigh, closed his eyes and for several moments seemed to be sleeping. Suddenly he opened his eyes and gazing in a sort of bewilderment around him said:

"Tom, I'm goin'," his voice sounded far away and the words were spoken as if his tongue was thick. The white circle about his mouth and nose were spreading back over his face, and his fingers picked nervously at the blanket that covered him.

Idaho Tom raised his head so that he could breathe easier. The old man seemed to define his object and continued:

"It's no matter, Tom, how I lay, for I'm passin' away. After all it's not so hard to die with the radiance of heaven opening around me. Where are the boys? tell them to come in so that I can bid 'em good-by."

Tom arose and going to the door communicated the old man's wish to those outside. One by one the rangers filed into the room, stole softly to the old man's bedside and taking his hand bid him farewell; then with heavy heart went out. Kit Bandy was the last to come in, and as he approached the bedside it was plain to be seen that he was deeply affected.

"Good-by, Daniel," he said, with a great lump in his throat.

"Ha, Kit, ole fellow!" Dan exclaimed, rallying at sight of the old detective; "it won't be long; no, it won't be long. Them gray hairs and them furrows of age tells me that you'll be along, by-and-by. Do your duty, ole friend, and come up by way of Calvary and the Cross."

With tears streaming down his cheeks and his form trembling with the deepest emotions, the strong man broke down, and he sunk into a seat and wept like a child by his dying friend.

Christie came and bade him good-by, then went sobbing to her child sleeping in the basket near.

"Tom," said Dan, his voice still growing feebler, "it's not the lick on the head that's killin' me, but a thrust in the side with a knife. I thought it war no use to tell you 'bout it, for you could not save me; and then the wound never bled externally. Tom, it's gittin' kind o' foggy in here, but out beyond in the great eternal I see a radiant light. Good-by, Tom."

He pressed Tom's hand, then closed his eyes. He breathed easier now, and Tom thought he was gone, when, to his surprise, he opened his eyes and said:

"Tom, let me kiss your boy, for it was he that gave me the first glimpse into heaven."

Idaho Tom lifted his sleeping babe from the basket and carrying it to Dan, permitted the old man to kiss it.

"There," he exclaimed, and he turned his head toward the wall. His eyes closed; his fingers shut down over the thumbs; his jaws fell apart, and all that was earthly of Dakota Dan had passed away to the realms of eternal life.

Earth to earth and dust to dust.

The death of Dakota Dan cast an additional gloom over the hearts of our friends, for all had felt so certain of his recovery the night before. But then none knew that he had received a more fatal wound than that upon the head. He had kept it a secret from them and as the wound did not bleed, they never dreamed of such a thing until it was too late.

A grave was hollowed out by that of Ichabod Flea, and just as the sun went down that evening, the body of the old hero, wrapped in a blanket, was lowered into its last resting place and covered from the view of the world forever. A stone slab, upon which Idaho Tom had chiseled with an Indian tomahawk the single word "Dan," was planted at the head of the grave, and there, along with those who fell in that memorable battle, rests the body of him whose life had been one of continuous adventures, and whose heart was ever overflowing with the milk of human kindness, love and compassionate geniality.

It was several days before the little party were enabled to leave the island, owing to the feeble condition of the wounded; but when at last, they were enabled to depart from the place, they were not a little surprised to learn that Aree Van Pruss was going with them. She had remained at the island ever since she had piloted the chief there with succor; but all supposed she was staying at the earnest solicitation of Christie, who seemed very happy in the brave and kind-hearted girl's presence. She would not have accompanied them away, however, had Christie not prevailed upon her to give up her outlaw home and go with them. She promised the maiden a home until she could obtain a home of her own.

After doing what she had done to break up the band of Prairie Paul, and to destroy the power that held the heart of the Gold Hills, she knew it would be death to return to her outlaw home. The time had been when her power over the men was as great as that of their leader, but she forfeited all this in her recent act in behalf of the besieged adventurers.

By her conduct one would never have known that she had loved Idaho Tom. She concealed her emotions effectually, and appeared as blithe and happy as it was possible for one in her circumstances to be. No one held her in the least disrespect on account of being the daughter of an outlaw; for innocence, purity and kindness so marked her thoughts, words and ways that all worshiped at the shrine of her beauty and goodness.

She became a shining light in Mennovalle by the side of which the beauty of Miss Judith Royce paled even in the estimation of Adam Farwell, the wealthy young cattle dealer. And it seemed the retribution of heaven for Judith's jealousy of Christie, that Aree should supplant her in Mr. Farwell's affection and eventually be led to the altar of wedded love.

Kit Bandy delivered the outlaw chief into the hands of the law, then returned to Nevada and at once forwarded to Herbert Dorne all the evidence necessary to confirm the legality of his sister's marriage with Idaho Tom.

With his wife and child, Idaho Tom returned to Virginia City, and settled down into a quiet life, where, as a stockholder in a rich silver mine, he is fast rising to prominence and wealth, aided and encouraged by the presence of a devoted, loving wife.

And they call their boy Dakota Dan—a very plain name indeed, but it will ever keep fresh in their hearts the love they cherished for the old ranger who sleeps on that lonely isle beneath a northern sky.

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